

HOW DOES POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT RESTRAIN MEDICAL RESEARCH?

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The increasing expectations for research productivities seem irrational without considering the environmental factors. The purpose of this study is to underscore the political environment around medical academics' research in an Iranian medical university. Unfortunately, political environment around medical academics is little examined through the lenses of interpretive study. Methodologically, a qualitative study from 2014-2015 in an Iranian medical university shows the different aspects of political environment around medical academics' research. Twenty-two academics joined as the main participants for the interviews and answered to the open-ended questionnaire. The findings of this study disclose that political environment has two levels of local and international environments with six secondary level dimensions. These dimensions that relating to local environment were: government limitation for overseas activities, and dictating research subjects. The dimensions that relating to international environment were: international journal disapproval, editors' sensitivity, and refusing visas, and blockage of Imports. Consequently, identifying and controlling the political environment for research are necessary to develop medical academics' research.

Keywords: Political Environment, Research Development, Medical Academics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Iranian government stressed on developing medical boundaries. Remarkably, two governmental documents such as Comprehensive Scientific Map of Iran (CSMI) and Vision 2020 echo this thoughtfulness in medical research. Based on these documents, Iran must be the leading nation in the region in medical research; however, according to the local studies, even if Iran attains the satisfactory amount of research publications, yet there is an immeasurable uncertainty of the quality of university research. Karimian *et al.* (2012) in their study brought the obstacles for doing research at medical universities in Iran. Their findings show inefficient human resources, political and economic constraints impede to achieve a certain number of publications and reasonable level of research quality.

Basically, Iran's 20-Year Perspective Document, Vision 2025, is the most credential document, which is acknowledged by the leader and head governors in 2004. It is prepared to distinguish and detect the challenges of the country in line with new world society. Iran's 20-Years Vision started from the year 2005 to 2025, and it is the main base of development plans (IRIEDCS, 2004). Based on the leader's

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statement in 2025, Iran must be the number-one country in South West Asia region in technology, science, and economy and with effective dealings in international affairs.

In order to fulfill the revealed objectives, the protective environment should be taken into account. Basically, human resources in general and academic members as a prime component of development convey a major role in fulfilling the objectives. Academics with the effective research can bring the appropriate change for the nation. Therefore, the planners and developers for professional programs should consider the macro and micro contexts, as if they want to meet the effective programs for academics' research development. Fundamentally, the role of higher education ministry and government is important as to provide proper environment for academic members (Bernbam, 2002). According to several experts, academic research is a phenomenon that is influenced by political, cultural, and economic changes (Edgar and Geare, 2001; Brew, 2009). The term political factor is the one that is highly emphasized by Becher and Trowler (1989). Other experts insist on the diversity of cultural, political, and other factors that can influence the research that should be heuristically studies in separate projects (Brown and Baker, 2007; Ashworth, 2009).

Fundamentally, academics need safe and supportive environment to run their research (Karimian *et al.* 2012; Schein, 1985; Hill, 1995; Thompson, 2003). Thus, in this paper scrutinizing and magnifying political environment, as one of the critical factor seems necessary as to achieve the expected research outcomes in Iran.

2. METHOD

We conducted the study between 2014-2015 and designed based on qualitative approach in order to come up with the deep understanding from the data. We used various sources for the data collection such as documentation, observation, open-ended questionnaires, and finally interview. We extracted different factors through three levels of open, axial, and selective coding with constant comparison tactic to analysis.

We chose the ground of the study in one of the high rankings Iranian medical state universities. Also, we collected the main data through twenty-two interviews and 44 open-ended questionnaires.

3. RESULTS

Research political environment is divided into local and international environment for research. International political matters include international journal disapproval, international editors' sensitivity, refusing the visa, blockading imports. Moreover, the local political issues are confined in the government plan to limit universities in overseas activities and dictating some subjects, which are related to government requests.

Regarding research political environment at international level, one of the main issues probably is the sanction. Days by days, new decisions from US and EU countries impact Iran's research political environment. International journal disapproval seems one of the side effects. Regarding publications, on 2012 as an example, international publishers like Elsevier and Emerald stopped Iran to send papers for publication. Following by this measure, many other journals prevent to publish Iranian works except those affiliate from other countries. Below is the typical example of a juniors' explanation about political issue that impact international publication:

I am working in ICU, before I thought I am not supposed to work qualitative research. But now everything changes and we have to do because of political issues. Moreover, there are some problems for international publication because of sanctions. You know in Elsevier and Emerald, we are sanctioned and they don't accept our work; moreover, some overseas editors are sensitive to the name of Iran for publication (I-3)¹.

It is explicit that for them to get promotion with international publications are necessary; however, in these situations because of political obstacles, they cannot publish their work in prominent journals. Also, she mentioned another issue like editors' sensitivity. Based on the researchers understanding apart from quality issue, international editors have become sensitive on Iran's name because of negative propaganda against Iran. The other key persons also reflect the issue of editors' sensitivities for publication. For instance, one of the seniors said,

"Most of the time, I am not successful for publishing my papers in international journal with high impact. I think it is relevant to our country condition. Sometimes the quality of work is not the criterion for acceptance. Probably, the kind of journal and the place that we do research is not acceptable for the editors. It may be out of the topic or interest of editors" (I-4).

Moreover, one of the research heads expressed,

"Because we are Iranian, in some journals we have problems for publication. Many of journals when they see that all the authors are Iranian they give us fast rejection. I got some rejections in after 12 hours. Just give you I am sorry and finish. Also we are in scientific sanctions. Before sanctions The Birth Journal was perfect for publication, but currently I sent a paper and after 2 hours, I got rejection. But if you find co-authors from UK or US, they will publish. Now we are doing in this way. For my last work, I ask a researcher from America I told him we are working in Iran, and research is for Iran, do you accept that, and he accepted. Now we are confident that we can publish our work" (I-14).

The researcher thought these projections regarding sensitivities probably are not the real excuse and the main issue would be the quality of the works and English writing. Basically, this is not just the issue among Iranian academics but a common phenomenon all around the world that because of the weaknesses in writing

or research process they blame the journal editors. However, abovementioned expressions show that before the sanctions, they could publish their work, but currently they get rejection (I-20).

Another international political issue is the rejection of visas for academics. In this study, academics pointed to the visa problems that they cannot get from some countries that are the pioneers, in their field of study. One of the typical instances of visa problem for sabbatical leave is reflected by one of the deans. She said,

“this is very difficult, and the condition are not good. You know that many countries don’t give us visa and offer letter. If someone gets the acceptance letter, it is for clinical learning not for research. Furthermore, almost none of the scholarships are for research” (I-11).

It is understandable that the combination of research activities can develop juniors. Joining overseas groups possibly boost up the juniors for not only learning research, also they acquire social academic behavior that stimulate other colleagues and students after return.

Another property of research political environment at international level is blockading imports. After the sanctions many goods and commodities have been blocked, and Iran is not authorized to release them. Therefore, research materials could not be available for academics to do research. Here this political constraint links to be economic as it is reflected by the participants. Sanction problem for transferring money to buy materials (I-19, I-20; I-21) and blocking research materials in customs because of sanctions (I-6; I-21) are the points to support this political issue.

Regarding research political environment at local level, as mentioned in the preliminary part of research political environment, research political environment at local level is aligned with research political environment at international level. Properties around research political environment at local level probably are reducing international communication and limiting political-oriented Research.

Basically, reducing international communication returns to Iran condition as the strategic country among Middle East countries. These strategic points return to geographic, political, economic, and religious factors. Basically, government is not fully opened for communicating with other countries. In informal discussion, participants mentioned some neighboring countries that they cannot interact for research (M -30). This situation and reduction of interaction with other countries could bring some limitations for research development. One typical expression from one of the deans shows the idea. He said,

“sometimes we receive the lists that the university signed some contracts with overseas universities but we haven’t seen any research activities. With UK and US we are not brave to communicate. The rest countries I don’t know. I am sure if I want to do any connections with abroad, I know I am alone” (I-1).

In Iran in order to have overseas collaboration academics find their friends from other countries and invite them for collaboration or having some workshops. Basically, this kind of limited activities cannot have significant effect on their progress (I-17).

Regarding limiting political-oriented research, the government is not an easily welcome international request for collaborative research. The topic is very critical for international research and directly universities probably cannot make the independent decisions for their overseas contract. The topics should filter through the bureaucratic system in order to get permission. One of the declarations from a senior reflects the idea. He said,

“Once we asked some budgets for HIV research. They told us because of the political issue they couldn’t approve the proposal. Even WHO said the organization will pay money for this proposal. But the university did not give us the permission to do this research. We have these kinds of political issues in our country. These are the political constraints that sometimes we cannot do anything to resolve” (I-8).

In this kind of topic, some religious and political affairs come in the middle. Governors are not eager to disseminate these kinds of medical topics, in order to save the prestigious position of Iran as a religious country. Their research area is too far from these topics and they cannot switch toward these determined areas (D-2). It shows that in some cases, the ministry is not aware of actual needs of disciplines, and such circulars are not practical for all majors and research areas. To this point, probably the weakness of local and international communication has been issued by political affairs. But the arguments that might be emerged from the issues are the outcomes from the weakness. According to the constant comparisons of the categories, one negative and one positive point are surfaced. Brain drain (I-11; R-26) and focus on actual local needs (R-9) are the negative and positive points, respectively.

4. DISCUSSION

The importance of political environment in order to provide an appropriate condition for academics is the significant factor that research developers and planners should consider in their strategies for research development. Research is one of the indices of Vision 2020 and CSMI in Iran that research culture hastens the development of this index. In order to understand political environment for research, considering the key components seems necessary. Political environment strongly influence the academics’ research outcomes that are the main purpose of this paper. By dissecting the political environment for research, the existence of two dimensions of international and local environment for research is noticeable in an Iranian medical university. In overall, the supporting academics by providing suitable political environment at international and national level probably accelerate the gradualness of research development.

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