Intervention of Iranian Criminal Law in Harmful Cultism, with Emphasis on Preventing Recruitment and Psychological Domination in Emerging Spiritual Movements

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Abstract

Harmful cultism, as manifested in certain emerging spiritual movements, is a complex and multidimensional contemporary phenomenon situated at the intersection of freedom of belief, spiritual lifestyles, social harm, and criminal conduct. On the one hand, mere belief in a particular doctrine, adherence to non-traditional forms of spirituality, membership in intellectual or ideological groups, or the promotion of unconventional views cannot and should not, in light of principles such as freedom of belief, the principle of legality of crimes and punishments, the principle of minimum criminal-law intervention, and the prohibition against criminalizing thought, become the subject of criminal-law intervention. On the other hand, criminological evidence and studies of cults indicate that certain pseudo-mystical or spiritually oriented groups may, through methods such as deception, coercive persuasion, information control, social isolation, the creation of emotional dependency, the inculcation of fear and guilt, and the sacralization of the leader, create conditions conducive to the hidden and multilayered victimization of their followers. Using a descriptive-analytical method and drawing on library-based sources, criminological theories, cult studies, and principles of criminal law, the present article seeks to answer the following question: To what extent is criminal-law intervention in harmful cultism, with an emphasis on preventing recruitment and psychological domination in emerging spiritual movements, feasible, legitimate, and effective? The findings indicate that a criminal-law approach toward emerging spiritual movements is justified only when the activities of a group go beyond belief, advocacy, or voluntary membership and manifest themselves in harmful, attributable, and provable conduct, such as fraud, unlawful acquisition of property, threats, coercion, exploitation, abuse of vulnerability, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, psychological harm, sexual abuse, or infringement of individuals' freedom of will.

Keywords: harmful cultism; emerging spiritual movements; psychological domination; cult recruitment; coercive persuasion; criminological prevention; hidden victimization.

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1. Introduction

The social, cultural, and communicational transformations of recent decades have provided fertile ground for the emergence and expansion of new forms of spirituality, self-help, spiritual healing, and pseudo-mystical movements. These currents, commonly—and at times academically—referred to as "emerging mystical movements," encompass a wide spectrum of groups, circles, training courses, energy-healing workshops, spiritual circles, self-knowledge systems, and syncretic teachings. Some of these movements may be merely intellectual, cultural, psychological, or lifestyle-oriented and may fall within the scope of individual and social freedoms. Others, however—particularly when characterized by closed organizational structures, charismatic leadership, demands for extreme obedience, psychological control, and exploitation of followers—may develop into harmful phenomena and may even acquire criminal-law significance. The importance of this issue lies in the fact that harmful emerging mystical movements generally do not begin their activities with overt criminal conduct. Many enter individuals' lives through the language of tranquility, healing, success, love, self-knowledge, energy, relief from anxiety, discovery of truth, or connection with a higher consciousness. Individuals who are recruited do not necessarily regard themselves as victims at the outset; rather, they may initially join the group with apparent consent, interest, and hope. The principal issue, however, is that such consent may gradually become impaired through deception, dependency creation, information control, group pressure, inculcation of fear, guilt induction, and sacralization of the leader. Accordingly, a traditional criminal-law analysis that focuses solely on apparent consent or the absence of physical coercion may prove inadequate for understanding cult-related victimization.

Classical studies of mind control and cults have demonstrated that authoritarian groups generally do not rely solely on overt coercion to dominate their members; rather, they employ a combination of psychological, communicational, and social techniques. In his well-known work on thought reform and the psychology of totalism, Robert J. Lifton demonstrated that milieu control, monopolization of truth, reconstruction of language, confession, guilt induction, and division of the world into the pure and the impure constitute important mechanisms for transforming individuals' minds and identities (Lifton, 1961). Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, in their analyses of cults, likewise employed the concept of "coercive persuasion" to explain a process through which individuals gradually become embedded in a system of dependency and obedience without fully understanding the process of control (Singer & Lalich, 1995). In her theory of "bounded choice," Lalich explains that members of charismatic cults appear to make choices, yet their choices are made within a predetermined and severely constrained framework (Lalich, 2004). Steven Hassan, through his BITE model, analyzes cultic domination across four domains: behavior control, information control, thought control, and emotional control (Hassan, 1988). On the other hand, criminal law is constrained by fundamental principles. The principle of legality of crimes and punishments, freedom of belief, proportionality, necessity, strict construction of criminal statutes, and the principle of minimum criminal-law intervention all prevent the state from entering the criminal sphere merely because a belief or spiritual group is unconventional. In other words, mere belief in a doctrine, attendance at a spiritual gathering, adherence to an intellectual leader, or promotion of a particular form of spirituality cannot be regarded as criminal conduct. Conversely, freedom of belief cannot serve as a justification for disregarding conduct such as financial deception, sexual exploitation, threats, coercion, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, psychological harm, or deprivation of individuals' freedom of decision-making.

Accordingly, the central issue addressed in the present article is the identification of an appropriate balance between two necessities: first, protecting freedom of belief and preventing the criminalization of belief; and second, protecting victims of harmful cults and preventing psychological domination, exploitation, and abuse. The main research question is: To what extent is criminal-law intervention in harmful cultism, with particular emphasis on preventing recruitment and psychological domination in emerging mystical movements, possible and justified? The hypothesis of this article is that criminal intervention is legitimate only when cult-related activity moves beyond the level of belief and membership and materializes in specific, harmful, and attributable conduct. Therefore, an appropriate criminal policy in this field should be limited, conduct-oriented, preventive, and victim-centered.

2. Harmful Cultism and Emerging Mystical Movements

2.1. The Cult and the Difficulty of Defining It

Defining the term "cult" is among the most difficult issues in religious studies, sociology of religion, criminology, and criminal law. In general discourse, the word "cult" often carries a negative connotation and is used to refer to groups whose beliefs, lifestyles, or organizational structures depart from prevailing social currents. In academic literature, however—particularly in the study of new religious movements—it is emphasized that not every small, different, or unconventional group should readily be characterized as a harmful cult. Some scholars have warned that the uncritical use of the term "cult" can lead to labeling, suppression of intellectual minorities, and disregard for freedom of religion and belief (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

In criminological analysis, however, what matters is not merely the group's name or designation, but its pattern of conduct. From this perspective, a group acquires the characteristics of a harmful cult when it exhibits authoritarian leadership, a closed structure, intensive control over members, severance of external relationships, demands for absolute obedience, sacralization of the leader, systematic deception, and exploitation of followers. Accordingly, the principal criterion adopted in this article is "behavioral harmfulness" rather than "doctrinal unconventionality."

2.2. Emerging Mystical Movements: Spirituality, Market, and Harm

Emerging mystical movements may be understood as a collection of spiritual or quasi-spiritual currents that, in most instances, develop outside established religious traditions or through selective combinations of elements drawn from religions, popular psychology, energy healing, personal-success doctrines, and spiritual healing. Such movements commonly attract audiences through promises of inner peace, relief from anxiety, healing from illness, financial success, self-knowledge, energy cleansing, connection with higher powers, or access to hidden truth. Importantly, not all emerging mystical movements can be regarded as harmful. Some may merely constitute forms of spiritual experience or lifestyle. However, when such movements are accompanied by false claims, substantial financial demands, unlicensed pseudo-therapeutic practices, social isolation, unquestioning obedience to a leader, or abuse of members, they move beyond the level of a spiritual inclination and toward a harmful phenomenon potentially subject to criminal-law scrutiny.

2.3. Harmful Cultism as a Conduct-Oriented Concept

In this article, "harmful cultism" refers to a set of behaviors, structures, and processes within a spiritual, quasi-spiritual, psychological, or ideological group that result in diminished member autonomy, psychological dependency, exploitation, physical or psychological harm, social isolation, financial deception, or sexual abuse. This definition deliberately avoids criminalizing broad labels or categories and instead emphasizes objective, observable, and harmful conduct.

This approach is also consistent with criticisms directed at the ambiguity of the concept of "cult." For example, Zablocki and Robbins emphasized the need to avoid oversimplification and to study controversial groups objectively and impartially (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Therefore, the purpose of the present article is not to condemn emerging movements as a whole, but to identify those forms of conduct that, because of their harmful nature, may legitimately become the subject of criminal-policy intervention.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Psychological Domination and Cult Recruitment

3.1. Robert J. Lifton's Theory of Thought Reform

In his seminal work, Robert J. Lifton employed the concept of "thought reform" to analyze processes through which individuals, under the influence of a closed and controlled environment, are induced to reconstruct their beliefs, identities, and loyalties. Although Lifton's study concerned political and ideological contexts, his analytical framework was subsequently applied in the study of cults. According to Lifton, milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for absolute purity, confession, sacred science, loaded language, doctrine over person, and the division of persons into those entitled and those not

entitled to existence are features of totalistic systems (Lifton, 1961). Similar characteristics may also be observed in harmful emerging mystical movements. For example, when a group leader presents himself or herself as the sole source of truth, regards criticism as evidence of deviation, interprets members' personal experiences exclusively through the framework of the group's teachings, or compels members to engage in repeated confession and self-blame, patterns of thought reform and psychological domination may be said to arise.

3.2. Coercive Persuasion in the Views of Singer and Lalich

Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, in *Cults in Our Midst*, emphasized that cultic control is generally not sudden, overt, or violent; rather, it develops gradually, relationally, and through coercive persuasion (Singer & Lalich, 1995). In this process, individuals are initially recruited through attractive promises; their sources of information are subsequently restricted, their communications are controlled, their former identity is devalued, and ultimately a new identity based on obedience to the group is formed. The significance of this theory for criminal law lies in demonstrating that an individual's apparent consent does not necessarily constitute free and informed consent. Where consent is formed in a context of deception, dependency creation, psychological pressure, and information control, its validity should be questioned. This does not imply a complete negation of individual agency; rather, it highlights the necessity of carefully examining the conditions under which that agency was formed.

3.3. Janja Lalich's Theory of Bounded Choice

In *Bounded Choice*, Lalich characterizes charismatic cults as environments in which members appear to make decisions, while the group structure severely limits their genuine options (Lalich, 2004). In her view, cult members become embedded in a system of meaning, commitment, fear, hope, and obedience that makes departure difficult. Under such circumstances, members may believe that they are acting freely, although their choices have effectively been shaped by the group structure and their authoritarian relationship with the leader. This theory is important for analyzing hidden victimization. Many cult victims do not regard themselves as victims for extended periods because the group's interpretive framework redefines harm as a "test," "growth," "purification," "negative karma," or "spiritual weakness." As a result, individuals not only refrain from seeking external assistance but may also blame themselves for their suffering.

3.4. Steven Hassan's BITE Model

In his analysis of mind control, Steven Hassan identifies four primary domains of control: behavior control, information control, thought control, and emotional control (Hassan, 1988). Under this model, cultic groups seek to control members' daily behavior, communication patterns, sources of information, modes of thinking, feelings of guilt and fear, loyalties, and even family and emotional relationships. In harmful emerging mystical movements, these four domains may manifest in different forms. Behavior control may include mandatory attendance at sessions, performance of prescribed exercises, payment of money, or severance of relationships with critics. Information control may involve prohibiting access to independent sources or discrediting families and the media. Thought control is associated with inculcation of absolute doctrines and prohibition of questioning. Emotional control may be exercised through fear of departure, guilt, shame, conditional love, and threats of exclusion.

4. Criminal-Law Foundations for Addressing Harmful Cultism

4.1. The Principle of Legality of Crimes and Punishments

The principle of legality of crimes and punishments is one of the most fundamental principles of criminal law. Under this principle, no act or omission may be regarded as a crime unless it has been criminalized by law prior to its commission. Likewise, no punishment may be imposed except pursuant to law. This principle protects against arbitrariness by public authorities, uncontrolled expansion of the criminal sphere, and expansive interpretation to the detriment of the accused (Ardebili, 2019; Mirmohammad Sadeghi, 2020). In the context of harmful cultism, the legality principle requires that labels

such as "cult," "emerging mystical movement," or "deviant group" should not, in themselves, constitute grounds for criminal prosecution. If conduct is criminal, it must be analyzed under a specific statutory offense, such as fraud, threats, coercion, unlawful acquisition of property, sexual abuse, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, or infliction of injury. Otherwise, criminal intervention may turn into discretionary and belief-oriented enforcement.

4.2. Freedom of Belief and the Prohibition of Criminalizing Belief

Freedom of belief means that individuals must remain immune from criminal interference in the internal sphere of their beliefs, faith, ideas, and spiritual orientations. Even where a belief is unconventional, uncommon, or subject to criticism, it should not be punishable unless it develops into harmful conduct against others. From the perspective of criminal law, thought and belief alone lack the actus reus of an offense, and their criminalization is inconsistent with the foundations of modern criminal law. Within this framework, membership in a spiritual group or attendance at mystical gatherings cannot be regarded as criminal so long as it is not accompanied by deception, coercion, exploitation, abuse, or infringement of the rights of others. Such an approach is also consistent with warnings by sociologists of religion regarding the dangers of labeling emerging groups (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

4.3. The Principle of Minimum Criminal-Law Intervention

Criminal law is the most severe instrument of social control, and its excessive use may result in expanded repression, stigmatization, increased judicial caseloads, and reduced efficiency of the criminal justice system. The principle of minimum criminal-law intervention requires that non-criminal mechanisms—including education, administrative supervision, social support, counseling, regulation, and prevention—be used first and that criminal responses be reserved for serious, clear, and harmful cases (Goldouzian, 2022; Mirmohammad Sadeghi, 2020). This principle is particularly important in the field of emerging mystical movements because premature and broad criminal intervention may drive groups underground, increase the attraction of prohibition, intensify members' dependence, and make victim support more difficult. Criminal law should therefore operate as an *ultima ratio*, or last resort.

4.4. The Harm Principle and Victim Protection

One of the principal criteria for justifying criminal intervention is the existence of harm or a serious risk to individuals' rights and interests. In harmful cultism, such harm may be financial, physical, psychological, sexual, familial, or social. For example, if a group deceptively obtains money from its members, prevents them from receiving medical treatment, uses their secrets to control them, sexually abuses them, or isolates them from their families, legally cognizable forms of harm may be present. Nevertheless, the harm must be identifiable, attributable, and, as far as possible, provable. This requirement prevents mere cultural or moral opposition to a movement from being characterized as criminal harm.

5. The Process of Recruitment and Psychological Domination in Harmful Emerging Mystical Movements

5.1. Identification and Targeting of Vulnerable Individuals

Harmful cults commonly recruit individuals experiencing psychological, emotional, or social crises. Persons facing bereavement, romantic failure, illness, anxiety, depression, loneliness, identity crises, occupational failure, or family conflict may be particularly receptive to promises of salvation. Such vulnerability does not necessarily indicate weakness of personality; rather, it reflects a crisis situation and an individual's need for support, meaning, and belonging.

Cultic groups exploit precisely these needs. They typically approach individuals through the language of empathy, love, tranquility, and hope and subsequently draw them gradually into structures of dependency. This process is consistent with Singer and Lalich's account of gradual coercive persuasion (Singer & Lalich, 1995).

5.2. Trust-Building and Attractive Promises

At the second stage, the cult attempts to present itself as the ultimate solution to the individual's problems. Promises such as curing illness, guaranteed success, eliminating depression, attracting wealth, finding love, cleansing energy, or escaping suffering are common at this stage. The leader or instructor is usually portrayed as knowledgeable, benevolent, exceptional, and endowed with special powers. From a criminal-law perspective, spiritual or motivational promises are not criminal in themselves; however, where such promises are knowingly false and are employed to obtain property, establish domination, or exploit members, they may acquire criminal-law significance.

5.3. Information Control

One of the most important instruments of psychological domination is information control. Harmful groups commonly discredit external sources, portray family members as obstacles to personal growth, label critics as enemies, and characterize consultation of independent sources as weakness or betrayal. Consequently, individuals gradually begin to interpret the world exclusively through the group. This corresponds to Hassan's analysis of information control. He regards information control as one of the principal components of mind control because, without access to diverse information, individuals lose their capacity for independent judgment (Hassan, 1988).

5.4. Identity Reconstruction

At this stage, the group seeks to devalue the individual's previous identity and construct a new identity based on cultic teachings. The individual's past may be characterized as "contaminated," "impure," "ignorant," or "filled with negative energy," while obedience to the leader or continuation along the group's path is presented as the only means of salvation. This reflects what Lifton analyzes in terms of doctrine over person and identity reconstruction (Lifton, 1961).

Identity reconstruction may result in severing family ties, abandoning education or employment, complete dependence on the group, and acceptance of irrational instructions. Under such circumstances, the individual's freedom of decision-making becomes severely impaired.

5.5. Creation of Fear of Leaving

Many harmful cults create intense fears to prevent members from leaving. Members may be told that departure will result in illness, failure, spiritual death, curses, punishment, loss of energy, misfortune, or psychological destruction. In some instances, tangible threats may also be employed, such as disclosure of secrets, social ostracism, or character assassination. From a criminal-law perspective, where fear induction reaches the level of threats, coercion, or exploitation of psychological weakness, it may become subject to legal scrutiny. A distinction must nevertheless be drawn between purely doctrinal fears and harmful, attributable threats.

6. Hidden Victimization in Harmful Cultism

6.1. The Concept of Hidden Victimization

Hidden victimization refers to a situation in which an individual has suffered harm, yet that harm does not become visible in official statistics, criminal complaints, or the criminal justice system. This situation is highly prevalent in harmful cults. Many members refrain from filing complaints because of psychological dependency, fear, shame, guilt, hope of salvation, or loyalty to the leader. From a criminological perspective, such victimization is highly significant because it demonstrates that the absence of a complaint does not necessarily indicate the absence of harm. Through her theory of bounded choice, Lalich demonstrates that cult members may find themselves in a situation in which, even after suffering harm, they perceive departure as impossible or dangerous (Lalich, 2004).

6.2. Financial Victimization

Financial victimization is one of the most common forms of harm in harmful emerging mystical movements. Some groups obtain substantial sums from members through the sale of courses, classes, training packages, private sessions, energy-healing devices, donations, compulsory contributions, or promises of success and healing. Where the transfer of property is based on deception, false promises, or exploitation of vulnerability, the conduct may acquire a criminal character.

6.3. Psychological Victimization

Psychological harm within cults may manifest as anxiety, depression, identity disturbance, chronic guilt, severe dependency, inability to make decisions, fear of leaving, or loss of self-confidence. Proving this type of harm in criminal proceedings is difficult, but it should not be disregarded from the perspectives of victimology and criminal policy.

6.4. Sexual and Emotional Victimization

In some harmful cults, the group leader or instructor may exploit his or her position of authority, spiritual influence, and followers' emotional dependency to establish sexual relationships or engage in emotional abuse. In such circumstances, a member's apparent consent does not necessarily constitute free and informed consent, because a relationship founded on domination, information control, psychological dependency, and sacralization of the leader may impair the individual's volition. From this perspective, whenever educational or promotional activities conducted within groups or cults result in psychological or physical domination over individuals, or in physical, sexual, financial, or religious abuse, criminal-law intervention is justified (Rostami, 2024).

6.5. Familial and Social Victimization

Harmful cults may gradually separate members from their families, friends, and support networks by disrupting their individual identities and fostering intense dependency on the group; this may lead to weakened family relationships, withdrawal from education, loss of employment, social isolation, and distrust of the outside world. Accordingly, although not all these consequences can directly be subsumed under criminal offenses, they should nevertheless be addressed within social prevention and criminal policy (Ahmadi & Izadi, 2023).

7. Forms of Conduct Subject to Criminal-Law Intervention

7.1. Fraud and Financial Deception

Where the operators of a mystical movement employ fraudulent means to induce individuals to pay money, purchase courses, transfer property, or invest funds, their conduct may potentially fall within the offenses of fraud or unlawful acquisition of property. For example, claims of guaranteed cures for illness, guaranteed success, communication with supernatural forces to resolve financial problems, or knowingly false promises may acquire criminal significance where accompanied by the acquisition of property. A distinction must nevertheless be drawn between exaggerated advertising and criminal fraud. Not every spiritual or motivational promise necessarily constitutes fraud. The essential elements include effective deception, the offender's knowledge of the falsity of the claim, and financial loss suffered by the victim (Mirmohammad Sadeghi, 2020).

7.2. Threats, Duress, and Coercion

Threats within cults may take overt or covert forms. Threats to disclose secrets, ostracize an individual, destroy reputation, inflict spiritual harm, impose a curse, cause misfortune, or bring about psychological destruction may be examined from a criminal-law perspective where they deprive the individual of freedom of decision-making. Although purely supernatural threats may be more difficult to establish in criminal proceedings, they are criminologically significant where combined with the victim's psychological condition and a relationship of domination (Mirmohammad Sadeghi, 2021).

7.3. Sexual Exploitation

Where a leader or core member of a group uses spiritual status or psychological influence to establish sexual relations with members, particularly vulnerable individuals, such conduct may be examined under criminal offenses relating to sexual crimes, coercion, deception, and abuse of a position of dominance or trust. In such cases, the central issue is whether genuine and freely given consent existed, because consent obtained in a context of psychological or spiritual domination does not necessarily constitute legally valid consent for purposes of criminal law (Beyk va Bardilo, 2023).

7.4. Unauthorized Intervention in Therapeutic Matters

Some emerging mystical movements engage in practices described as energy healing, spiritual healing, bodily and spiritual cleansing, or treatment of incurable diseases. Where such interventions are carried out without professional authorization or outside the scope of professional competence, or where individuals are discouraged from seeking effective medical treatment, they may cause serious physical and psychological harm and, in addition to civil and disciplinary liability, may fall within offenses relating to unauthorized intervention in medical practice and other relevant criminal provisions.

7.5. Physical or Psychological Harm Resulting from Cultic Rituals

In some cultic groups, practices such as extreme ascetic exercises, sleep deprivation, harmful dietary restrictions, substance use, prolonged psychologically coercive sessions, and compulsory exercises may endanger members' physical or mental health. From a criminal-law perspective, the mere unconventionality of such conduct is insufficient to justify criminal intervention. Criminal intervention becomes justifiable when an effective causal relationship exists between the perpetrator's conduct and the harmful result and when, from both customary and legal perspectives, the harm can be attributed to the person or persons directing the group. Depending on the nature and severity of the result, such conduct may then be analyzed under offenses involving bodily injury, psychological harm, endangerment of health, or non-pecuniary harm (Shirzadkhani Najafabadi & Jazayeri, 2021). Accordingly, the principal criterion in the criminal assessment of such practices is the establishment of a causal nexus between the group's controlling or ritual practices and the physical or psychological harm inflicted upon the member, rather than the mere existence of cultic beliefs or rituals.

8. The Possibility of Independently Criminalizing Harmful Cultism

8.1. Arguments in Favor of Independent Criminalization

In criminal-policy analysis concerning harmful cultism, it is legitimately argued that traditional criminal offenses, although effective in addressing certain tangible outcomes of cult-related conduct—such as injury, threats, deception, or unlawful acquisition of property—do not, by themselves, encompass all dimensions of this phenomenon. Harmful cultism often operates gradually, cumulatively, and through psychologically oriented mechanisms, and a significant proportion of its harms arise before the emergence of obvious financial or physical consequences, in the form of psychological domination, continuous indoctrination, weakening of volition, communicational isolation, and exploitation of members' vulnerabilities. Consequently, exclusive reliance on traditional offenses may create difficulties at the stages of proof or prosecution and may leave some harmful conduct outside the scope of criminal responses. In such circumstances, the independent criminalization of certain organized forms of conduct, such as cultic exploitation, organized psychological domination, or abuse of psychological dependency, could help fill existing legal gaps and improve the effectiveness of criminal policy, particularly where the legislature seeks to intervene at the stage at which domination and psychological subjugation are being formed, before more serious harms occur (Pourmohammadi, 2025).

8.2. Arguments Against Independent Criminalization

Opponents of independently criminalizing harmful cultism, relying on fundamental principles of criminal law—including the legality principle, minimum criminal-law intervention, proportionality, and the presumption of innocence—maintain that

creating a new offense in this area may entail conceptual ambiguity, overcriminalization, and unjustified interference with freedom of belief and lifestyle. Moreover, many harmful cult-related behaviors may already be prosecuted, where their legal, material, and mental elements are established, under existing offenses such as fraud, threats, coercion, infliction of injury, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, and sexual offenses. From this perspective, the principal problem is not an absolute absence of criminal offenses but the difficulty of detection, proof, identification of victims, and effective victim support. A cautious approach therefore requires strengthening the capacities of existing laws, preventive mechanisms, psychosocial support, and specialized training for criminal justice institutions before rapidly expanding the sphere of criminalization.

8.3. A Middle-Ground Solution: Strengthening Existing Offenses and Targeted Intervention

A more appropriate solution would therefore be to strengthen and purposefully interpret existing criminal offenses rather than broadly criminalizing "cultism," while, where necessary, enacting specific provisions concerning abuse of vulnerability, therapeutic deception, psychological exploitation, and unlicensed pseudo-therapeutic activities. This approach both protects freedom of belief and enables intervention against harmful conduct.

9. Strategies for Preventing Recruitment and Psychological Domination

9.1. Social Prevention

Social prevention of harmful cultism emphasizes reducing the underlying factors that facilitate recruitment, including identity crises, loneliness, weak family support, and social isolation. Accordingly, strengthening families, providing access to psychological counseling, supporting young people, and enhancing a sense of social belonging may play important roles in reducing susceptibility to cultic groups (Sharifi & Kakavandi, 2010).

9.2. Educational and Cultural Prevention

Public education concerning cult recruitment methods, warning signs of harmful groups, the risks of pseudo-therapeutic practices, and the importance of critical thinking constitutes one of the most important preventive strategies. Individuals should be made aware that absolute promises, an unquestionable leader, prohibition of questioning, control of communications, compulsory financial contributions, fear of leaving, and severing ties with family are warning signs. This approach is consistent with Hassan's model of behavior, information, thought, and emotional control (Hassan, 1988).

9.3. Situational Prevention

Situational prevention involves reducing opportunities that may be exploited. In this context, supervision of pseudo-therapeutic institutions, licensing of therapeutic and counseling services, transparency in advertising, monitoring financial transactions, prevention of unscientific therapeutic claims, and provision of confidential reporting mechanisms can play an important role in reducing harm.

9.4. Supportive Prevention

Victims of cults, particularly individuals who have left them, commonly experience anxiety, identity crises, guilt, fear, and distrust during the process of departure; in the absence of adequate support, the likelihood of returning to the group or experiencing exacerbated psychological harm increases. The report entitled "Psychological Harms of Erfan-e Halgheh, from Stress to Schizophrenia" likewise refers to psychological, social, and spiritual harms experienced by affected individuals and emphasizes the need for care and support after departure.

9.5. Targeted Criminal Prevention

Criminal prevention in the field of harmful cultism should be limited, conduct-oriented, and directed toward harmful behavior. The purpose of criminal intervention should not be to eliminate beliefs, suppress unconventional groups, or

criminalize mere membership in emerging spiritual movements. Rather, intervention is justified only when cultic activities manifest in conduct such as deception, exploitation, threats, sexual abuse, unlawful acquisition of property, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, or deprivation of members' access to social and medical support. Under such circumstances, criminal law intervenes not because of the group's doctrinal character but because of the harmful consequences of its conduct. This approach is more consistent with principles such as legality of crimes and punishments, minimum criminal-law intervention, freedom of belief, and victim protection (Najafi Abrandabadi & Hashem Beigi, 2018).

10. Final Analysis: Criteria for the Legitimacy of Criminal Intervention

In light of the foregoing discussion, criminal intervention in harmful cultism is legitimate where several criteria are simultaneously satisfied:

First, the conduct must go beyond the level of belief. Mere belief, spiritual orientation, or membership does not constitute a basis for criminal intervention.

Second, the conduct must be harmful or dangerous. Harm may be financial, physical, psychological, sexual, or social, but it must be identifiable and documented.

Third, the conduct must be attributable to specific individuals. Members or leaders cannot be punished merely because of the ambiguous structure of a group without proof of their role and criminal responsibility.

Fourth, criminal intervention must be necessary. Where non-criminal mechanisms such as administrative supervision, social support, or education are sufficient, punishment should not be used.

Fifth, criminalization or criminal-law interpretation must be strict. Vague and general concepts such as "deviation," "false mysticism," or "cult" should not, in themselves, constitute grounds for criminal prosecution.

Sixth, criminal policy should be victim-centered. Victims of cults often require support, trust-building, and rehabilitation rather than merely being drawn into a rigid and formal criminal process.

11. Conclusion

Harmful cultism, as manifested in certain emerging mystical movements, is a complex, multilayered, and interdisciplinary phenomenon whose analysis requires the integration of criminal law, criminology, victimology, social psychology, and religious studies. The phenomenon is challenging because, on the one hand, it is connected with the sphere of freedom of belief and spirituality and, on the other hand, in some instances, it involves deception, psychological domination, exploitation, and victimization. The findings of this article demonstrate that criminal law cannot and should not intervene in mere belief, spiritual orientation, or membership in an intellectual movement. Such intervention would be inconsistent with the principle of legality of crimes and punishments, freedom of belief, minimum criminal-law intervention, and the prohibition against criminalizing thought. Conversely, where cultic activity is accompanied by specifically harmful conduct such as fraud, unlawful acquisition of property, threats, coercion, sexual exploitation, unauthorized therapeutic intervention, psychological harm, or exploitation of vulnerability, criminal-law intervention may be justified. The theoretical studies of Lifton, Singer, Lalich, and Hassan demonstrate that cultic domination generally does not begin through overt coercion but develops through a gradual process involving recruitment, trust-building, information control, emotional dependency, identity reconstruction, and the creation of fear of leaving. Accordingly, the legal analysis of this phenomenon should not be confined to individuals' apparent consent but should also consider the circumstances under which volition is formed, psychological dependency, and power relations. At the same time, broad and ambiguous criminalization of cultism should be avoided. The preferable model is a limited, conduct-oriented, preventive, and victim-centered criminal policy. Under this model, criminal law performs an ultimate and complementary role alongside social, educational, situational, and supportive prevention. The objective is not to suppress belief or eliminate unconventional forms of spirituality, but rather to protect victims, prevent psychological domination, and address harmful conduct. Accordingly, it is recommended that the legislature refrain from broadly and ambiguously criminalizing categories such as cultism or emerging mystical movements. At the same time, educational and cultural institutions should increase public awareness of cult recruitment techniques, mind-control methods, deceptive promises, and warning signs of harmful groups. In this regard, judges, law-enforcement officers, social workers, and counselors should receive training concerning the mechanisms of psychological domination, coercive persuasion, and hidden victimization. Finally, if legislative

amendments are adopted, they should focus on conduct such as organized deception, abuse of vulnerability, psychological exploitation, and unauthorized pseudo-therapeutic practices.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

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