



SmallMedia

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CULTURAL CENSORSHIP IN IRAN

Iranian Culture in a State of Emergency



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Dear Reader,

The recent uprisings across the Middle East have once again highlighted the important role the internet is playing in fostering social and political change. At Small Media Foundation we recognise the power of “new media” but we also believe that we need to broaden our horizons and acknowledge the ongoing struggles of “old media.”

After reading the many other reports about censorship in Iran we recognised an urgent need to look beyond the internet and the press and examine the impact that state censorship is having on other cultural spaces as well. This report, which focuses on the censorship of literature, music, cinema and theatre in the Islamic Republic of Iran, is our attempt to capture and describe the restrictive forces that have been increasingly exerting their weight on these cultural spaces since the disputed presidential election of 2009, with a particular focus on the winter of 2010.

We are planning to update this report regularly and have plans to research other neglected and misrepresented areas of media ecology in Iran. We would like to reach out to anyone who is interested in the media situation and has some capacity to engage with it; we need your help in doing so. Please help us on this journey by subscribing to our mailing list on our website (SmallMediaFoundation.com) or by sending us an email (contact@SmallMediaFoundation.com) to receive the latest updates.

Many thanks,

Mahmood Enayat
Director, Small Media Foundation

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Introduction

The condition of culture in Iran is moving towards what can only be described as a ‘state of emergency.’ This report addresses some of the major concerns in the fields of literature, cinema, theatre and music in Iran by examining the reactions of audiences and practitioners to the policies of the conservative Iranian government. Although most of the cited examples are from recent months and reflect on the cultural and political climate following the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections, they are historically grounded and have been occurring since the instigation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In fact, the monarchy also exerted its omnipresent power through censorship before the Iranian revolution. At the time of writing it is early 2011 and the events surrounding this year’s Fajr Festivals of Theatre, Film and Music, and the annual Tehran Book Fair have been studied as important illustrations of the current state of affairs.

This report is organised into four sections, each of which begin with an overview of the main points covered in the section. The first section examines literature, the second focuses on film, the

third explores theatre and the fourth presents an overview of music in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The comparative brevity of the third and fourth sections attest to how restricted these artforms are in Iran. Commonalities abound: the arbitrary pre-review process that a work of art (be it a book, film, play, concert or musical recording) must go through before it reaches the public domain is both stringent and arbitrary, the government uses state-controlled media to its own advantage and cracks down harshly against artists and practitioners when it believes an act of subversion has occurred. And as books are removed from shelves, shops are closed, albums are kept from public distribution, critiques of films digress into libel of an extremely personal nature and crucial characters are culled from plays, Iran's artists are becoming increasingly frustrated and disillusioned.

مرگ، بی گمان سر خواهد رسید، و ما را و شمارا به کام خود فرو خواهد کشید. ما را که ناشناس و بی کس و کاریم، به آغوش سردگور می سپرند، و شمارا که معروف عالمید، مردمان بی شمار، بر سر دست می برند و اشکریزان و بر سر زنان، جلوی چشم صدها دوربین و صدها میهمان خارجی، بدی تان می نهند. مزار ما، گذرگاه باد و باران و محل تابش آفتاب داغ می شود، و مزار شما، با گنبد و بارگاهی مجلل، با تالارها و شبستانها و رواقها و هتلها و دانشگاهها و حوزههای علمیه، و با فروشگاهها و کتابخانهها و بوستانهایی پر از آذین خواهد یافت.

ما، که غریب و گمگشتهایم، زود از خاطرهها خواهیم شد، شما اما، که از سامان دهندگان بخشهایی این سرزمیناید، تا روزگاران دراز بر سر خواهید بود. با هر آنچه که ما نخواهیم داشت، و با همه آنچه که شما خواهید داشت، یک سر نوشت مشترک، ما را و شمارا به هم پیوند می زند. و آن: و پاسخگویی به رفتار و اعمال دنیایمان در سرای باقی است. و باز این که: ترازوی دقیق و مویین خدا، به یک جهش، تکلیف خرد و کلان ما بی نشانان را مشخص می کند، و تعیین تکلیف شما، به خاطر به دراز خواهد کشید.

گرچه در دستگاه سریع الحساب، زمان به کشداری ایام عمر ما نخواهد بود، تا به ریز ریز اوامر و نهیها و خندهها و اخمها و طردها و جذبهایتان رسیدگی نشود، زمان بر شما به کندی گذر خواهد کرد.

ما را و شمارا یک به یک بر بلندیهای می ایستانند تا راضیان و ناراضیان با عبور از مقابل ما، ما را و شمارا شناسایی کنند و فریاد هواخواهی و سر دهند. ما را که آوازهای با ما نیست، نخواهند شناخت، شما اما دوستان راضی، و شاکیان ناراضی بسیار خواهد بود.

Part One: Literature

- Restrictions on media and art have increased since the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections
- At Tehran's International Book Fair in 2010 the government banned the sale of any books that had received their publishing approval before 2007, which was when Ahmadinejad and the conservative government came into power
- As paper prices rise and government subsidies decrease, the quality of books is being compromised
- Conservative and hardline media and intelligence agencies are accusing some authors and publishers of being 'subversive,' 'perverse,' and 'anti-Islam'
- Publishing companies seen to be 'subversive' are having their licences revoked in an unlawful way
- The government is supportive of writers who support their ideology, facilitating monetary grants and better distribution facilities
- The Ministry of Culture has unlawfully purchased vast quantities of books to support pro-government publishers and propagate revolutionary ideals



Since the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections and the very public outrage that followed, the Iranian government has become increasingly draconian in the imposition of restrictions and the implementation of new policies concerning the publication of books. There has been no other comparable era of such heavy-handed suppression since the instigation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In the past, publishers and authors were mainly concerned with the harshness and arbitrary nature of the Iranian government's censorship, but today these complaints cover many other aspects of the publication process. Books have been banned, paper prices have increased, the government has cut subsidies, book stores are being closed down or are approaching bankruptcy, and public funds are being used to financially assist those who support the regime's ideals. And authors, as they grow increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with the current state of affairs, are struggling to find the motivation to write.



Organised attacks against independent publishers and writers

Governmental crackdown against authors and publishers is not limited solely to the censorship of content or the prevention of distribution. In the past months, the government of the Islamic Republic has starting making serious allegations against independent writers, poets and publishers in an attempt to silence the voices of those who are perceived to be against the regime. Allegations of treason or of attempting to overthrow the regime are the most serious indictments currently being used by the government against publishers and writers. In January 2011 the Soft Security Strategic Think Tank, an organisation that is reportedly run by the Basij force of Kajej Nasir University and linked to security and intelligence agencies, published a 64 page pamphlet called “Coloured Whispers.”¹ In this pamphlet, seven publishers (Ney, Cheshmeh, Kavir, Atae, Lahiji’s Roshangaran,

1. Golnaz Esfandiari, "Leading Iranian Publishers, Writers Accused of Attempting to Overthrow Islamic Establishment," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, January 11, 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/iran_publishers_accused_of_attempting_overthrow/2272991.html.

Ghoghnoos and Akhtaran) and dozens of writers and translators were accused of attempting to overthrow the Islamic Republic.²

In addition, Fars News Agency, an ultraconservative news agency supported financially by the Revolutionary Guard, has published a list of “subversive literary figures who were involved in the sedition [public support for the Green Movement] after the elections.”³ Those mentioned include: Simin Behbahani, Hossein Sanapour, Arash Hejazi, Shams Langaroodi, Reza Baraheni, Abbas Maroufi, and Shahrnoush Parsipour. These ‘subversive’ figures, some of Iran’s most prominent contemporary authors, have publicly supported the pro-reform movement. ‘Coloured Whispers’ is now being used as supporting evidence for the government to suppress and censor some literary works.

The public defamation of publishers and writers is an old practice in the Islamic Republic of Iran and it peaked during Khatami’s eight years as president between 1997-2004. At this time the conservatives were desperately seeking to detract from the strength of the pro-reform movement and were slandering publishers or authors affiliated with it. These insults remained threats, as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was controlled by reformists who provided a front of resistance that protected authors and publishers.

It seems that Ahmadinejad’s government is basing its actions against publishers and writers upon cases that have been prepared by intelligence agencies, such as the Soft Security Strategic Think Thank, following the 2009 elections. For example, the

2. This pamphlet is available online in Persian at http://jang-narm.com/uploads/zamzamehaye-rangi_7015.pdf.

3. Fars, "Role of Subversive Writers After Election," Fars News Agency, June 14, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8903230396>.

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has recently revoked the license of ten Iranian publishers.⁴ Some of these publishers, such as Jeyhoun, were involved in publishing educational books in the fields of psychology and communications. In the case of Akhtaran, one of the publishers that was mentioned in 'Coloured Whispers,' the Ministry of Culture cited 'poor management' as the reason for the revocation of their licence. Baztab Nehar, Digar and Agah are among the other publishers who have had their licences revoked. Citing 'poor management' as a reason seems to have allowed the authorities to circumvent the official procedure for the revocation of licences.

Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, confirmed that the licences of ten of Tehran's publishers had been revoked, but said, "When a publisher's permit is revoked, the Deputy Culture Minister is obliged to announce this publicly. However, some of these publishers had their permits revoked because they had not completed the necessary permit-renewal procedure."⁵ Hosseini continued: "This said, the publishing licence of Caravan Books Publishing Company has been revoked because Arash Hejazi has acted against the Iranian regime from outside the country." Hejazi is the manager of Caravan Books and the government is very uncomfortable with the fact that he was present at the death of Neda Agha-Soltan and attempted to revive her. The revocation of a licence or permit for business and/or trade can only happen following an official court order, which must take place in the presence of a representative of the trade union and can only occur after an offence has been substantiated.

4. Parsine, "Revoking the License of Ten Iranian Publishers," Parsine News Site, February 22, 2011, <http://www.parsine.com/fa/pages/?cid=32752>.

5. VOAPNN, "Minister Confirms the Revocation of Publishing Licenses," Voice of America Persian News Network, February 28, 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/persian/news/iran/iranian-publishers-29-02-2011-117109563.html>.

Prior to the revocation of the license of these ten publishers, Mehdi Kamous, one of the censors of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, declared that Mahi, Cheshmeh and Ghoghnoos were among the publishing companies who actively promote a western lifestyle in Iran in a secretive and covert way.⁶ In addition, many books have been removed from the shelves over the past few years after their authors have been accused of 'promoting fake mysticisms.' This is an issue that has been the focus of the attention of intelligence agencies and has had a domino effect on the decisions of the cultural ministry. Among the works deemed to be promoting western ideals and fake mysticisms are the books of Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian author who Iranian hardliners have accused of promoting 'pervert ideas.' Some books that condemn Coelho's work have been published and distributed in Iran. For example, in *Study of Current Mystical Trends*, written by Bahman Sharifzadeh (a member of the Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought), the author claims that Paulo Coelho is the leader of a "perverse sect" who believe in reincarnation. Sharifzadeh also criticises Coelho's belief in magic, mysticism and the supernatural. Sharifzadeh is also critical of the fact that Coelho's book discusses "sexual and magical mysticism," stating that this is the reason that Zionistic lobbyists have enjoyed his work. Governmental researchers have alleged that the comments made by Coelho in his blog are indications of a "perverse mind."⁷

These allegations have not just been directed at writers like Coelho, but at some of Iran's religious intellectuals as well. For

6. Mehr, "Some Publishers Promote a Western Lifestyle in Iran," Mehr News Agency, February 19, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1257017>.

7. Fars, "Discussing a Study of Current Mystical Trends in a Book Review Session," Fars News Agency, January 24, 2009, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8711050500>.

example, Abdolkarim Soroush⁸ and Mostafa Malekian have been accused of trying to “secularise society” and of encouraging youths to follow new spiritual and false mystical paths.⁹ In this respect, pro-government authors like Sharifzadeh are categorising Coelho and reformist religious intellectuals as one and the same, when the only thing that links them is a tendency towards more democratic ideals. It seems likely that these restrictions will increase in the future and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance will continue to ban literature written by authors who the authorities accuse of ‘religious subversion’ and ‘promoting false mysticism.’

Last winter, Paulo Coelho wrote in his weblog that Arash Hejazi, the translator and publisher of all of his works in Iran, had advised him that his books had been removed from the shelves. Coelho asked the Brazilian authorities to get involved, but this was at the time when Brazil was negotiating a nuclear triangulation between themselves, Iran and Turkey, and had developed a good working relationship with Tehran, demonstrating tactical support towards their proliferation of nuclear technology for civilian purposes.¹⁰ The Brazilian authorities remained silent and Coelho, in an attempt at subverting the censorship of the Iranian government, began publishing the translations of his work online.¹¹

On January 13, 2011 Coelho updated his blog thanking the Brazilian authorities for their eventual involvement and stating

8. Abdolkarim Soroush, Abdolkarim Soroush’s Official Website, <http://www.drorsoroush.com/English.htm>.

9. Bahman Sharifzadeh, "Religious Intellectuals› Thoughts are Leading Us to False Mysticism," Interview by Fars, Fars News Agency, November 22, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8909010537>.

10. BBC, "Brazilian President Urges Iranian Nuclear Solution," BBC News, November 23, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8373822.stm>.

11. Paulo Coelho, "Pirate Coelho Fights for Persian People," Paulo Coelho’s Blog, <http://paulocoelhoblog.com/pirate-coelho-fights-for-persian-people/>.

that he had received a response from the Iranian Embassy in Brazil after the Brazilian authorities had pressured them for a response.¹² The official response Coelho had received was that the ban was against Hejazi's publishing house, not Coelho's books. The letter stated, "According to information from the competent authorities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the news of the ban on the publication and circulation of works of Brazilian author Paulo Coelho was seen as peculiar, biased and not true ... [these books] are published today in Iran with a large print run and are available in bookstores. Unfortunately, that news [the banning of Coelho's books] was created and planned by Hejazi (an individual who is accused of the homicide of Ms. Neda Aghar Soltan) ... in accordance with a global plan aimed at tarnishing Iran's image."¹³

Government-sponsored writers and the mass commissioning of books for publication

While independent writers and publishers are under pressure and are systematically facing harsh restrictions, the government is actively strengthening those institutions, associations, publishers and authors who are in line with the policies of the Islamic Republic. The "Pen Association of Iran" is an organisation that has been recently established in order to detract from the work of the Kanoon-e Nevisandegan-e Iran (lit. "the forum of Iranian authors"), which is the only independent Iranian writers union. This association received 500,000,000 IRR (nearly 30,836 GBP)

12. Paulo Coelho, "Books banned in Iran," Paulo Coelho's Blog, January 14, 2011, <http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2011/01/09/books-banned-in-iran/>.

13. Paulo Coelho, "Note from the Embassy of The Islamic Republic of Iran in Brazil," Paulo Coelho's Blog, January 14, 2011, <http://paulocoelhoblog.com/2011/01/14/note-from-the-embassy-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-in-brazil/>.

from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance following the 2009 presidential elections. The “Pen Association,” whose members are all supporters of the conservative government, wrote a letter to Khamenei thanking him for his support during the election process. Shortly before Ahmadinejad’s government had given the funds to the Pen Association, the office of Ayatollah Khamenei had also donated nearly 12,335 GBP.¹⁴

Writers who support the government have also been provided with insurance, travel grants and personal loans in the past few months and it seems that the financial support of these authors and the accusations being made against independent writers are two sides of a double-headed coin; the government is using both of these methods to suppress the publishing industry and to stifle independent thought.

In recent months, the government has also spent huge amounts of money on the publication of books that support the government and denounce the Green Movement. According to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the number of these types of books will exceed 1,000 by the beginning of 2012. Bahman Dorri, Iran’s deputy culture minister has said, “In the past year ... 350 books have been published outlining the topic of ‘sedition,’ and these titles have greatly contributed to showing the ugly faces of the subversive people”.¹⁵

14. Fars, "Government's Donation to the Pen Association," Fars News Agency, December 4, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8909131487%20>.

15. IRNA, "Publication of 350 Books About the Danger of Subversion," Islamic Republic News Agency, February 16, 2011, <http://www.irna.ir/NewsShow.aspx?NID=30250758>.



After the presidential elections in 2009, the government began categorising authors into two different groups, “revolutionary” and “subversive.” Revolutionary authors are those who are seen to be publishing work in support of the ruling government. The most prolific revolutionary author is Mohammad-Reza Sarshar, who is continuously posting articles against the reformists and the leaders of the Green Movement on his personal website.¹⁶ He has also received many commendations and endorsements from Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran.

‘Subversive authors’ and ‘subversive publishers’ are those who are seen to be writing about issues that are not in line with the regime’s ideals. As the examples cited above have demonstrated, authors who have written about banal topics but have taken part in the Green Movement have also been discriminated against. By categorising and distinguishing between authors in this way, the media and cultural sections of the government are trying to develop a framework that will be able to financially support those believed to be “revolutionary authors,” whilst discriminating against ‘subversive authors’ and this is what is being referred to as the ‘soft war.’¹⁷

In the days preceding this year’s Ashura ceremony Khabar Online reported that Iran’s culture minister had purchased 5,000,000,000 IRR (300,000 GBP) worth of books about the ceremonial day of mourning.¹⁸ The day after Ashura they reported that Bahman

16. Mohammad Reza Sarshar, The Official Site of Mohammad Reza Sarshar, <http://www.sarshar.org/en/>.

17. TitrOnline, "The Term ‘Soft War’ is Generated in Iran as a Reaction to Conspiratory Thinking," Titr Online, November 9, 2010, <http://www.titronline.ir/vdcj.aevfuqe8osfzu.html>.

18. Ashura occurs on the tenth day of Moharram in the Islamic calendar. It is a day of mourning commemorated by Shia Muslims as they remember the

Dorri, the Deputy Culture Minister, had dedicated a further 300,000 GBP to purchasing more books about Ashura, justifying this act by stating, "Publishers and general libraries from all over the country have had an immensely positive response to the first purchasing order and this has resulted in the second order of books."¹⁹ Yet how could these publishers, officials and libraries communicate with each other and express their support for this scheme when all of their offices are closed for three or four days surrounding Ashura? The Iranian government is dictating the types of books available for general consumption by financially and logistically supporting publishers it deems to be in line with its conservative ideology.

This mass commissioning and purchasing of books, even though it may have received religious backing, is unlawful. The culture minister may only buy books from publishers if the Council for the Selection and Purchasing of Books has approved the order. However, Bahman Dorri bypassed this process and it remains unclear as to whether or not the selection process was fair among the many different religious publishers and authors who specialise in these kinds of books. The issue of mass book purchasing by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has always been a cause of dispute between publishers and the ministry. This is because the mass purchasing carried out by the Ministry of Culture financially supports publishers and promotes their work. However, Ahmadinejad's government uses mass book purchasing to entice publishers and authors who are in line with the ideals of the regime. During the reform era, a list of the books

martyrdom of Imam Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad at the Battle of Karbala.

19. KhabarOnline, "Mass Purchasing of Books about Ashura by Ministry of Culture," Khabar Online, December 17, 2010, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-116352.aspx>.

purchased by the government was published on a weekly basis, and the council also involved some publishing institutions in the book selection process -- this transparency and communication has long since ceased.

Another way that the conservative government supports the authors and poets who follow the 'revolutionary ideals' is through state-sponsored literary festivals like the Fajr Festival, an annual festival of the arts that marks the anniversary of the instigation of the Islamic Republic. Such festivals have been consistently criticised by independent authors, who prefer to steer clear of government-sponsored festivals. Fars News published a report attacking private prizes and independent literary festivals, which the culture minister argued was based on 'documented field research.'²⁰ The report's negative rhetoric illustrates the regime's intention to eliminate non-governmental literary prizes, which are a crucial part of civil society, even though prizes in non-governmental literary festivals often go to books that are published with the permission of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

The government is increasing the number and the value of literary prizes and awards on a continuous basis, which has positive repercussions for authors who work within the state's official ideology, but critics and literature analysts are arguing that these governmental prizes are not promoting the expansion of the publishing industry as they should be. Critics believe that the prizes are devised to conceal the disorganisation, lack of structure and the bias of the government. In 2009 hardline author Mohammad-Reza Sarshar was promoted within the council to the position of chief of the governmental prizes for

20. Fars, "Some Book Prizes Are Against Islamic Culture," Fars News Agency, December 25, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8910011455>.

literature. However, Sarshar could not fulfil his responsibilities and he resigned. Organisers of independent prizes believe that authors desperately need the government to become more relaxed when it comes to approving the publishing of books. They need this more than financial support from official institutions, and without this the independent publishing industry will be unable to flourish.

Further complications of the publication process and the disappointment of writers

Over the past two years the publication process has become increasingly difficult and the publication of certain books has become impossible. In addition to the arbitrary and unpredictable censorship practices of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the high cost of paper and a lack of support for independent publishers has contributed to the frustration and disappointment of many people in the publishing industry. The destructive impact of the abolishment of financial subsidies on the publishing industry has vexed publishers. Also, the Iranian government's own import policies have revealed their impact on the publishing industry. The production quality of books, the output of publishers, the diversity of subject matter and the buying capacity of the Iranian people have all decreased.

While international trade and economic sanctions are negatively affecting the publishing industry in Iran, the subsidy cuts being made by the government and their import policies are also contributing to the increasing cost of publishing and further reducing the purchasing power of the Iranian people. As the

economic climate worsens in Iran, items such as books are beginning to be seen as luxury items.²¹ In addition, publishers cannot increase the price of books because they will lose what few customers they have left. This means that the quality of books is being compromised in order to compensate for the difficulties imposed by the current political and economic climate and it is this reduction in quality that will cause the most long-lasting damage to the publishing industry.

Ali Asghar-Youssefnejad, the spokesman of the Iranian government's Commission of Industry and Mining, discussed the harmful impact of the government's import policies in an interview with Iranian Book and News Agency (IBNA): "These policies have had a very negative impact on the production of raw materials within Iran and also on the purchasing of the necessary machinery for publishing."²² Borzu Saryazdi, the manager of Ashk Publishing Company, agrees: "International sanctions and the current economic climate in Iran have impacted on the publishing industry and production levels have diminished and the purchasing power of the people has been reduced. However, the effects are taking some time to be noticed by the general public, as the purchasing of books does not seem to be a main concern for most Iranians at this point in time."²³

The subsidy cuts rolled out in December 2010 affected goods such as fuel, wheat, milk, water, bread, rice and cooking oil. Other

21. Ramin Mostafavi, "Booksellers of Tehran Falling on Hard Times," Reuters, February 24, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/24/us-iran-books-idUSTRE71N5HV20110224>.

22. IBNA, "The Government Should Support the Print Industry," Iran Book News Agency, August 25, 2010, <http://www.ibna.ir/vdcdgwt9u.ak9yt4prra.html>.

23. CHN, "Reduced Book Purchasing Power After Cut Subsidies," Cultural Heritage News Agency, November 1, 2010, <http://www.chn.ir/news/?section=2&id=51894>.

prices should have remained stable and the Iranian government had promised that the price of books would not be affected following the subsidy cuts. Ahmadinejad told a crowd in north-eastern Iran, "Satan may tempt some people in this country, for example a factory owner, to put up the price of his products ... [but] our agents will catch him and fine him."²⁴

However, two weeks following the cuts, the price of paper had increased dramatically. Mir-Younes Jafari, vice-president of the Union of Tehran Printers, informed Mehr News Agency that the prices of paper and cardboard had increased and cautioned that this increase may cause printers to cease production.²⁵ This was before Norouz (the Iranian New Year), at a time when many publishers were also struggling to complete the seasonal influx of orders that they had received. Jafari advised Mehr News that the price of cardboard had increased sharply over the preceding two months (from 0.44 GBP per kilo to 0.71 GBP) and that the price of all other kinds of paper had also increased. Imports have been affected as well; paper made in South Korea, which was 18.16 GBP per ream at the close of 2010, was 20.19 GBP on January 2, 2011.

The process of getting a book to the final stages of publication is complicated. Authors and publishers must negotiate the pre-review process of the Book Council of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance before their books can reach the public domain. Some authors wait years for permission to publish their books and, even if they are lucky enough to receive approval, this

24. Mohsen Asgari, "Increased Security as Iran's Subsidy Programme Bites," BBC News Middle East, November 9, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11685293>.

25. Mehr, "Paper Prices Have Escalated," Mehr News Agency, January 2, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1223177>.



is no guarantee that their books will remain on the shelves. Many books that have previously obtained a licence for publication have had their permits revoked unlawfully. The Book Council justifies the pre-publishing review process by referring to the bylaws set in place by the High Council of the Cultural Revolution in 1367 (1988).²⁶ These bylaws relegate all authority regarding publishing permission to the Book Council, and this is why the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is often accused of making decisions based on their own preferences, political alliances, and/or religious biases.

Some people involved in the publishing industry have attempted to get the Iranian parliament to consider legislation outlining specific criteria to be observed during the pre-review process. Shahla Lahiji, the manager of Roshangaran va Motale'ate Zanan and winner of the IPA Freedom to Publish prize in 2006, was unable to persuade even Khatami's reformist parliament to consider the draft in 2003. The government has accepted that the pre-review process is very complicated and exhausting for publishers because of the lack of clarity regarding the regulations. In recent months, many famous writers have lost any hope they may have had to publish their books under such circumstances. The poet Mohammad-Ali Sepanlou, who recently had one of his books banned, told the Iranian Labour News Agency, "In these conditions, I do not even feel like doing any work."²⁷

These difficulties are now permeating Iran's book fairs and have particularly affected the International Book Fair of Tehran. The

26. These bylaws, known as the "Decisions of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution," are available online in Persian on the Ministry of Culture's official website at <http://www.farhang.gov.ir/intro-rules-rule3-fa.html>.

27. ILNA, "Mohammad-Ali Sepanlou's Book Banned," Iranian Labour News Agency, January 5, 2011, <http://www.ilna.ir/newstext.aspx?ID=172430>.



confiscation of certain books, the closing down of book stalls that stocked the works of oppositionist authors, and the imposition of unconventional regulations regarding the distribution of books has angered both publishers and customers.²⁸ For example, during last year's book fair in Tehran (23rd May, 2010), the government permitted only books that had been approved for publishing after 2005, i.e. during Ahmadinejad's term, to be sold at the book fair. This was a direct attack against what was perceived by the conservatives to be a relatively relaxed period of reform during Khatami's two terms as Iranian president.

An autocratic government when it comes to distributing books

The latest piece in the soft war's puzzle is the set of restrictions being imposed on books through the government's distribution policies. This is a critical issue for the government's security and intelligence agencies because if they have full control over the distribution process of books, they can prevent the distribution of books by so-called 'subversive authors.' In addition, they can also promote the books that they believe are representative of their own way of thinking.

Tehran is a big city with an overflowing population and there are many inherent problems when it comes to distributing books. However, this problem is not just specific to Tehran and is also occurring in Iran's other cities. One of the reasons that the Tehran International Book Fair is functioning more as a super-sized book store than an exhibition, is because of the problems surrounding

28. Khabar Online, "Books of Ayatollah Montazeri and Saneie Have Been Removed From Tehran's Book Fair," Khabar Online, May 6, 2010, <http://khabaronline.ir/news-60052.aspx>.

distribution. People prefer to purchase their books from the fair because the variety in book stores is limited.

In addition to the difficulty of getting books delivered to their stores, another issue facing book store owners is that while selling books is not hugely profitable, the taxes levied are high. In the winter of 2009, the deputy culture minister announced that book shops would be eligible to pay lower taxes because they were non-commercial enterprises. This new rule also allowed for the establishment of publishing offices and book shows in privately-owned buildings. While taxes may have been reduced, book store owners face other difficulties as well, and as provincial book exhibitions grow in size, the number of customers visiting book stores is diminishing. Large book distributors in Tehran have also come under the attack of governmental news agencies and the government is using their media to accuse book distributors of trying to keep the control of the book industry in their own hands.

However, just as the government has suppressed those authors and publishers who are perceived to be subversive, the story of the book sellers does not begin nor end here. Some years ago Ansar-e Hezbollah, a militant conservative Islamist group, attacked a book shop in Isfahan and confiscated 700 books and a number of magazines. And Tehran's book sellers will always remember the arsoning of Morgh-e Amin book shop in 1995, which was carried out by an anonymous gang who were taking a stand against a book that had been published by Morgh-e Amin. The book, *Gods Only Laugh on Mondays*, by Mohammad Reza Khoshbin Khoshnazar, told the story of three children, one of whom was characterised as sexually perverse and later joined the Basij forces during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Those opposed to the book believed it to be against the principles of

Islam and accused it of insulting the efforts of young volunteer fighters during the war. However, the arson was gratuitous; under pressure from conservatives, the Ministry of Culture had already revoked the book's permit and confiscated all copies of the book.²⁹

Attacks on bookstores have continued during Ahmadinejad's government, albeit in a different fashion. In 2007 the overwhelmingly popular Nashr-e Sales book shop and cafe was closed down by order of a section of the police force concerned with commercial enterprises. The justification for the enforcement of their trading ban was that a commercial unit could be either a book shop or a cafe, but not both. Following this incident, four other bookstore/cafes were closed down: Ketab-e Vanak, Ketab-e Roshan, Darrous, and Vistar Books. These stores received notices to cease trading and were closed down one by one. Another book store/cafe named Badragheye Javidan was closed down and the manager of this store said that the person who informed him of the intent to close down his shop said, "All of the cultural depravity in this country stems from book shops such as yours."³⁰ The first book shop/cafe in Tehran was opened by Lahiji's Roshangaran va Motale'at-e Zanan Publishing Company at the beginning of the 2000s, and it boasted the slogan, 'Reading a book with a cup of tea.' The cafe became a gathering point for intellectuals, but it suffered the same fate and was also closed down by the authorities.

29. Farhad Salimi, "Arson on Tehran Bookstore Sparks Wide Debate," *The Militant*, October 9, 1995, http://www.themilitant.com/1995/5937/5937_21.html.

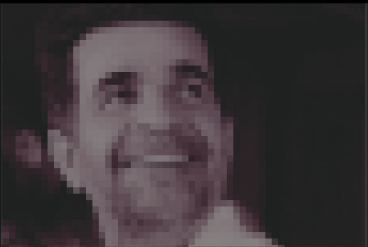
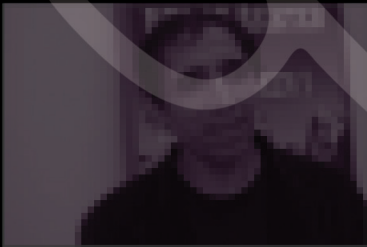
30. Domino, "No Cafe for Book Lovers," *Domino Literary Magazine* (blog), October 27, 2007, <http://www.domino.blogfa.com/post-266.aspx>.



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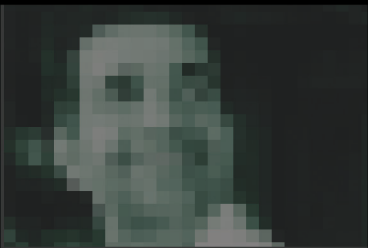
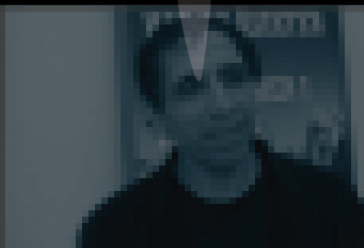
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Part Two: Cinema

- During the formative years of the Islamic Republic, cinema, like all other art forms, was severely restricted
- The Islamic government started to support cinema when it realised it could be used as a tool for propaganda
- Anything that weakens or attacks the principles of Islam is banned from films
- There are restrictions on the clothes worn in films, the music used and the subject matter
- Pro-government films are getting financial and logistical support, while independent and pro-reform filmmakers are being punished, even jailed
- A film about Khomeini's life finally screens at the Fajr Film Festival after three years of promises that it would be completed; Afkhami, the film's original director, denies all involvement
- Farhadi's film wins accolades at Berlinale Film Festival; hardliners argue it should not be called an 'Iranian film' as it was produced outside of their control
- House of Cinema members are accused of being 'immoral' by pro-government film director Farajollah Salahshor
- The House of Cinema take Salahshor to court, their evidence is dismissed, and he is fined 2.36 GBP
- Hardliners push for the gender segregation of cinema audiences, and succeed in one university

Iranian cinema is lauded around the globe for its visually sensuous exploration of emotional and poetic topics and its esoteric political allegories. Much of the creative and symbolic innovation Iranian cinema is famous for stems from the restrictions imposed on it by the Iranian government. For example, filmmakers have developed subtle ways to show romantic relationships between people because the laws of the Islamic Republic demand any sexual references be purged from films.


Many of the Iranian films that receive accolades at international film festivals are available only on the black market in Iran, and films that are screened internally but become too popular, are generally banned quickly. Cinema was also censored during the shah's reign over Iran, and the earliest instance of film censorship occurred in the early 1900s when interpreters hired to read translations of the captions of silent films were instructed to alter the dialogue, change the plots or both.³¹ In the 1930s a city ordinance required theatre managers to screen their films in front of a city official who decided whether or not it was suitable for screening in public.³² And thus the pre-review process was established.

During the first four years of the Islamic Republic, 1,956 of 2,208 domestically-produced films (both pre- and post-revolutionary) were banned. However, the government moved quickly to 'Islamify' cinema, recognising it as a "valuable instrument that could be used to plant the seed of revolution firmly in the Iranian mind."³³ Film censorship's unwritten rules make negotiating the

31. Iranianfilms.net, "Film Censorship," last modified 2006, <http://www.iranianfilms.net/film-censorship.html>.

32. Ibid.

33. Article 19, ed. *Art and Censorship in Iran* (London: Article 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression, 2006), pp. 20-21, <http://www.article19.org/>



pre-review process immensely difficult. The censors have been known to take issue with unhappy endings and anything they believe weakens or attacks the principles of Islam. In 1996 a directive was issued to filmmakers that forbade tight feminine clothes, any part of a woman's body except for the face and the hands to be shown, any physical contact or 'tender words' between men and women, any jokes about the police, the army or the family unit, any foreign or joyful music, and any bearded negative characters (which could be seen as an insult against the conservative clergy, who must wear a beard according to their interpretation of Islam).³⁴

Current state of cinema in Iran: neither practitioners nor the government are happy

Because film was the first of the banned media to be re-approved after the Iranian Revolution, and Iran's film industry has evolved more or less in parallel with film in the west, it may seem that the government's policies on Iranian cinema are not as powerful as its policies in other cultural and artistic areas. However, some of the personal attacks that the Iranian government have directed at cinema practitioners are far more vehement than those experienced by practitioners in other cultural fields. In an interview with Fars News, pro-government film director Habibollah Bahmani proclaimed, "Iranian cinema has not been able to meet the criteria of the conservative Iranian government."³⁵ Bahmani did not explain what these criteria are, but his comment insinuates that the government's main intention of gaining control over the

pdfs/publications/iran-art-censorship.pdf.

34. Article 19, ed. Art and Censorship in Iran, pp. 23.

35. Fars, "Iranian Cinema Hasn't Been Able to Meet the Criteria of the Conservative Iranian Government," Fars News Agency, December 12, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8909211339>.

film industry is to propagate conservative ideology.

This is not the first time that Iranian cinema has been criticised by totalitarian forces and it has been happening since the instigation of the Islamic Republic in diverse forms. From the arson of cinemas to the banning of films, the prohibiting of certain actors to work within the industry and, more recently, the arrest and imprisonment of famous directors such as Jafar Panahi, personal attacks against cinema practitioners are steadily increasing. Cinema practitioners believe that the eight years during Khatami's presidency, commonly referred to as the reform era, were the best years for providing new opportunities to filmmakers and actors. Conservatives always refer to these years as a period of 'decreased values,' and the partial freedoms allowed to the film industry during this era is still a sore topic for conservatives.

During the past year neither the governmental authorities of the Islamic Republic nor the cinematographers of Iran were happy and their dissatisfaction came to the forefront during the 29th annual Fajr Film Festival. This festival is an annual reflection on the current state of cinema in Iran, and clearly demonstrates the ever-changing policies of the Iranian government and the attempts made by pro-reform cinema practitioners to subvert the authorities.

After the festival was held, the ultra-conservative Kayhan newspaper, which publishes hardline opinion pieces, wrote, "The 29th cycle of the Fajr Film Festival concluded without bearing any positive fruit at all."³⁶ Kayhan newspaper is announcing its

36. Keyhan, "Reflections on Fajr Theatre Festival," Keyhan Newspaper, February 24, 2011, <http://www.kayhannews.ir/891205/9.htm#other1100>.

disatisfaction with the winners of the festival, Asghar Farhadi and Masoud Kimiaie, neither of whom are supported by the ruling authorities. It seems as though these two were selected for the grand prizes because there were no worthy candidates amongst the state-backed cinematographers. Kayhan continued, "Iranian cinema has either showed its indifference to the ideals of the Islamic Republic or has been mocking these ideals."³⁷

On the other hand, Iran's independent and pro-reform cinema practitioners were also dissatisfied with the proceedings of the Fajr Film Festival. Mohammad Mahdi Askarpour, the general manager of the independently-run House of Cinema, said, "There is widespread dissatisfaction about how the festival was run this year, which is partly due to the mismanagement of the festival and partly because of the unusually strict conditions surrounding the production and distribution process in the country today."³⁸ Cinema director Ali Atshani agreed, "The festival has divided filmmakers into two groups, 'us' and 'them.' If you are an insider or a supporter of the government, you will be assigned a place in the competition section of the festival even if your film is not ready for screening, but if you are not an insider, and your film is not ready, there is no way that you will be considered."³⁹

The film *Payan Nameh* (lit. "Dissertation") by Hamed Kolahdari (2010), is an example of a pro-government submission to the Fajr Film Festival. This film was made with financial support from the Ministry of Culture and was produced by Ruhollah Shamaghdari, who is the brother of Javad Shamaghdari, the

37. Ibid.

38. Green Voice, "Festival's Discredit and the Distrust of Artists," *The Green Voice of Freedom*, April 21, 2011, <http://www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/apr/21/12648>.

39. Ibid.

deputy film commissioner of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. In protest of the biases inherent in the Fajr Festival some prominent directors asked the secretary of the festival to remove their own films from the judging list: Kamal Tabrizi, the director of the bestselling film *Marmoulak* (*The Lizard*, 2004), Reza Mirkarimi, director of *Be Hamin Sadegi* (*As Simple as That*, 2008) and Maziar Miri, the director of *Padash-e Sokout* (*The Prize of Silence*, 2007) were among the directors who asked for their new films to be removed from the judging list.

Reza Mirkarimi, whose films have always received accolades during previous festivals, spoke about his disillusionment with the festival and his lack of respect for the grand prize, the Crystal Simorgh: "To be quite honest, I have lost my motives for taking part in the competition section of the festival. It is not because I do not wish to win the prize, it is because the Fajr Festival has unfortunately strayed from its professional and neutral path and this is discouraging filmmakers from taking part in the competition. Therefore, it is really not important for me to win a prize from such a festival."⁴⁰ The Crystal Simorgh trophy is the Iranian equivalent to the Oscar award, with multiple prizes being presented at each annual Fajr Film Festival for various aspects of cinema production, film music and acting. The money given in conjunction with the prizes varies from year to year and is decided by governmental authorities.

Some films, like Behrouz Afkhami's *Farzand-e Sobh* (lit. "the son of dawn"), a film about Khomeini's life, disappointed both friend and foe during this year's Fajr Film Festival. Afkhami is a well known director who has produced popular films such as

40. Khabar Online, "Fajr Festival Has Strayed From its Professional Path," Khabar Online, February 8, 2011, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-129001.aspx>.

Aroos (The Bride, 1990) and Shokaran (Hemlock, 2000). When the Institute for the Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini decided to make a film about Khomeini's life as the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Afkhami was chosen to be the director. Afkhami decided to show Khomeini's life during his childhood and the 1960s instead of his life as the Supreme Leader of Iran, and there were no issues with his proposed budget or storyline. However, issues arose which the film's producer, Mohammad-Reza Sharafodin, the Secretary of the Society of Revolutionary Cinema and the Sacred Defense, who is close to the ruling conservatives, decided he wanted to overdub the film using Dolby techniques in a studio outside of Iran. Whilst Afkhami was in Canada working on his most recent film *This is Not My House* (2011) Sharafodin began to recut the film without his approval.

For the past three years the organisers of the Fajr Festival have promised that *Farzand-e Sobh* will be included in the programme, but it finally premiered during the 29th Fajr Film Festival (February 5-15, 2011). Before the premier arguments between the Afkhami and the producer escalated, beginning with a letter of complaint from Afkhami. When the news of the film's scheduled premiere was released Afkhami wrote a letter to Masoud Shahi, the secretary of the Fajr Film Festival, requesting that the film be removed from the festival's programme. His request was denied, and the film premiered to mixed reviews. Afkhami told the media, "I have not seen the movie, and I do not consider myself to be the director. The producers have basically stolen my name."⁴¹ According to a blog post by "Pedestrian," journalists and representatives of the media who attended the premier clapped and made noise throughout the screening to

41. Tabnak, "Afkhami's Letter about the Screening of *Farzand-e Sobh*," Tabnak News Site, January 28, 2011, <http://goo.gl/hEoLo>.



express their disapproval.⁴² During a press conference Afkhami advised those present that although the film's budget was 1,300,000 GBP he was yet to receive his agreed wages.⁴³

On the flip side, cinematographers transformed this year's Fajr Film Festival into a platform for expressing their dissatisfaction concerning the current political climate. When Hamed Behdad, who had been awarded the Crystal Simorgh for best supporting actor for his role in Masoud Kimiaee's *Jorm (Crime)*, went on to the stage to receive his prize, he spoke of his wish for "only a little bit more happiness and freedom."⁴⁴ And during the inaugural ceremonies of the festival, in the presence of the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Masoud Kimiaee called for the sentence of Jafar Panahi to be reviewed. This led to conservatives directing personal attacks towards Kimiaee.

The conservatives' attack on independent cinematographers

The success of Asghar Farhadi's film *Jodaeie Nader az Simin* (English title: *A Separation*, 2010) at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival was sweet during this dark period of Iranian cinema, but the Iranian regime, which dismissed the film, used its conservative media arsenal to level a personal attack against Farhadi.

42. Pedestrian, "Khomeini Comes to the Big Screen," Pedestrian (blog), February 9, 2011, <http://www.sidewalklyrics.com/?p=7600>.

43. Fars, "Press Conference About the Film Farzand-e Sobh," Fars News Agency, February 8, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911190047>.

44. CafeCinema, "What Hamed Behdad Said about the Iranian Cinema," Cafe Cinema News and Review Website, February 16, 2011, http://www.caffecinema.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1715:1389-11-27-18-46-30&catid=34:news-iran&Itemid=58.



Farhadi's film caused mixed reactions amongst the ruling authorities of Iran. On one hand, the cinematic qualities of this film disarmed the government to the extent that the Fajr Film Festival, which is managed by Ahmadineja's croney Javad Shamaghdari, was forced to give some prizes to the crew of the film and also to Asghar Farhadi himself. On the other hand, the more radical arm of the authoritarian party, whose views are frequently published in Fars News, Javan, Kayhan and other conservative websites close to the government, were not happy with the recognition the film had received at the Fajr Festival. Moreover, the huge success of this film angered Ahmadinejad's supporters. They have argued that any film made independently and thus outside the remit of their authority, should not be recognised as 'Iranian' in foreign film festivals. The radical conservatives' negative opinion of Farhadi stems from the fact that he openly supports the Green Movement and attended some demonstrations following the 2009 elections. The fact that Farhadi's film had been successful in the Berlin Film Festival, an event that had been dedicated to the commemoration of the efforts of pro-Green Movement director Jafar Panahi, angered the government.⁴⁵

The pressures stacked against Asghar Farhadi are so great that he has declared that he is going to make his next film in Germany, outside the ubiquitous control of the ruling authorities of Iran. In recent years, many prominent Iranian cinema directors have made their films outside Iran in order to escape from censorship and governmental pressures. Abbas Kiarostami and Bahman Ghobadi are among these directors and it will be difficult for them to return to Iran under the present leadership.

45. ILNA, "Ministry of Culture Insists Fajr Festival's Judges Were Unbiased," Iranian Labour News Agency, February 19, February, <http://ilna.ir/newstext.aspx?ID=181166>.

At the end of the winter of 2010, an appreciation ceremony was held at the House of Cinema in Tehran for those who had participated in the Berlin International Film Festival. During this ceremony Siroos Alvand, a well known Iranian director, went on stage to present a plaque to Farhadi in recognition of his contribution to social cinema. Alvand noted that Iran's outstanding filmmakers are often pessimistic in their portrayals of Iranian society and life, but argued that in this film Farhadi showed that it was possible to find the true heart and epicentre of Iranian society without "giving the wrong directions." He furthered, "I am proud to be Farhadi's colleague."⁴⁶ Ayatollah Khamenei and other conservatives have often criticised Iranian filmmakers for being negativistic. Khamenei always says something about the negative portrayal of Iranian society in Iranian films in his meetings with artists and filmmakers, and he considers these to be providing the 'enemy' with another excuse to attack Iran: "these negative portrayals only serve to further promote hopelessness in Iranian society."⁴⁷

Following the 2009 presidential elections, the concept of 'soft war' (Persian: jang-e narm) became fashionable amongst conservatives. The conservatives' vocal objection to negative portrayals of Iranian society in independent films is a prime example of the type of attacks made in the 'soft war' against independent cinema practitioners. The conservatives have

46. Green Voice, "Independent Cinema in Response to Ayatollah Khamenei," Iran Green Voice of Freedom, March 7, 2011, <http://www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/mar/07/11649>.

47. Aftab, "Hopelessness in Iranian Society is a Consequence of Negative Portrayals in Our Cinema," Aftab News, July 3, 2010, <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcj88ev8uqeyiz.fsfu.html>.

accused independent filmmakers of seeking support from Iran's 'enemies' by competing for prizes in foreign film festivals.


Raja News' website recently commented, "in Iranian cinema, people think that if films are more artistic if they are dark and pessimistic and show disappointment."⁴⁸ However, accusations such as these were also made by Morteza Avini in the early 1990s. Avini was a documentary filmmaker during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) who was killed by a landmine in 1993 while making a documentary about soldiers who went missing in action. He stated these accusations mainly against Mohsen Makhmalbaf's movies, which continue to receive critical acclaim in foreign film circles.

From the conservatives' point of view, many of the films made by independent Iranian filmmakers like Kiarostami, Panahi, Makhmalbaf and Farhadi are considered to be 'black' films with 'dark' stories. For example, the film *Hich*, by Abdolreza Kahani is one film that has been accused of presenting a negative portrayal of Iranian society and the conservative authorities have also managed to prevent the film from being viewed outside of Iran.

Fars News Agency recently wrote about the negative portrayals of Iranian society in cinema, stating, "so-called human rights activists in western countries are choosing to promote films that they believe can be used as a weapon against the Islamic Republic."⁴⁹ But artists have another opinion. They consider such accusations to be part of a political game that the conservatives are

48. RajaNews, "Dark Portal Syndrome in Pseudo-Intellectual Cinema," Raja News, July 26, 2010, <http://www.rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=56240>.

49. Fars, "Few Iranian Films Avoid an Exaggerated Negative Portrayal," Fars News Agency, February 6, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911170409>.



playing in order to restrict the creative freedom of independent cinema practitioners.

Attacks on pro-reform cinema practitioners and audiences

Although nearly two years have passed since the controversial result of the presidential elections was announced in June 2009, the drive to support the Green Movement is still powerful among artists in spite of the resistance fronted by the government. Through Ebrahim Hatami Kia's transparent support of the Green Movement in his latest film *Gozareshe Yek Jashn* (2011), he enraged the conservatives so much that he did not receive any Crystal Simorghs at this year's Fajr Film Festival. This was the first time that Hatami Kia did not win any accolades. *Gozareshe Yek Jashn* portrays the events following the controversial election result from a pro-reform perspective. This is what caused government officials and pro-government critics to react strongly against the film.

Gozarsh-e Yek Jashn depicts controversial issues in society, particularly those concerning young people. The main location for the film was the southern suburbs of Tehran, which are renowned for being some of the poorest areas in the city. The film takes place over the course of 24 hours and narrates the story of a marriage agency in the period directly following the 2009 presidential elections. The government complained about the film's closing scenes. Esmail Ahmadi-Moghaddam, Iran's national police chief, called this film an "exaggeration" of events and said, "the closing scenes of this film attempt to show that last year's

political unrest was a consequence of social suppression.”⁵⁰ In addition, Aftab website, reporting from the film’s private premiere in the Ministry of Culture, mentioned that Mohammad-Hossein Saffar-Harandi, the previous Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, was not pleased with Hatami Kia’s film.⁵¹

In an interview with Fars News, Masoud Farasati, one of Iran’s prominent pro-government film critics, said “Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn is a leap backwards for Hatami Kia. This is not a good film and it lacks any clear or particular purpose.” He continued a convoluted manner, “When somebody doesn’t have a clear ideology, and the film is produced as if it were made twenty years ago, the film also cannot have a clear ideology.”⁵²

There were also attacks from conservative news websites towards this and all of Hatami Kia’s other films, despite not having any issue with the other films previously. Teribon described Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn as “an imaginary version of the uprisings” and said, “with this film, Hatamikia has distanced himself from his old friends by throwing his new affiliation with the opposition movement in their faces.”⁵³ The conservatives had thought that Hatami Kia was on their side due to his depiction of the Iran-Iraq war from the perspective of a soldier before, during and after the war.⁵⁴ In their criticism of Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn Teribon

50. Fararu, "Iran's National Police Chief Comments on Hatamikia's Last Film," Fararu Website, February 12, 2011, <http://www.fararu.com/vdcaoni.49naw15kk4.html>.

51. Aftab, "Saffar-Harandi's Reaction to Hatamikia's Film," Aftab News, February 12, 2011, <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcb98b8zrhb5ap.uuur.html>.

52. Fars News, "Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn is a Leap Backwards for Hatamikia," Fars News Agency, February 12, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911230694>.

53. Teribon, "Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn is a Report on Subversion," Teribon Mostazafin, February 17, 2011, <http://www.teribon.ir/archives/40339>.

54. Hatami Kia's films *Az Karkheh ta Rhein* (1993), *Booy-e Pirahan-e Yusef*

wrote, "This film is completely farcical and Hatami Kia is trying to accuse the regime of forcing their own personal tastes onto sociocultural issues in Iran."⁵⁵

The attacks of the government extend beyond cinematographers like Asghar Farhadi and Hatami Kia and into theatre seats. The Minister of Culture accused the audience of the 29th Fajr Film Festival, many of whom protested during screenings of state-sponsored films such as Kolahdari's *Payan Nameh*, of 'subversion' and 'causing unrest.' The minister lost his temper when audiences booed and whistled during the film, which narrates the 2009 Iranian presidential elections from a pro-government perspective. The film was voted the worst film of the year by a majority of Iran's critics, including some close to the government.⁵⁶ This was surprising as the film was made with funds from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and a cultural team from the Ministry of Intelligence had been on the film's advisory board.⁵⁷ Alireza Sajadpour, head of the culture ministry's vetting office, said in an interview with the pro-government weekly "Mosalas" magazine, "Some critics showed their intolerance and hastiness by behaving like uneducated idiots because a film says one word in contradiction with their own personal opinion. I think that the controversial discussions following the *Payan Nameh* film represented a dark time for Iranian film critics. Today, we are seeing that our film critics have not moved forward with film makers and the public, and they should hurry to catch up." He

(1995) and *Ajans-e Shishe-i* (1999) depict veterans of the Iran-Iraq war in a compassionate and semi-glorifying way.

55. Teribon, "Gozaresh-e Yek Jashn is a Report on Subversion."

56. Cinema Negar, "Even Conservative Critics Comment on *Payan Nameh*'s Weaknesses," Cinema Negar Website, February 22, 2011, <http://www.cinemanegar.com/articleview.php?cat=36&id=1350>.

57. Ayande, "Audiences Will Like *Payan Nameh*," Ayande News, March 2, 2011, <http://www.ayandenews.com/news/26595/>.

continued, "Critics are backward people and although they tried to boycott the movie in such a mean and vomit-inducing way, they were not successful."⁵⁸ Keyvan Kasirian, a film critic, in response to these accusations, said, "Wake up Mr Sajadpour! Immorality also has its limits."⁵⁹ He continued, "When the language of one of the country's authority figures on culture concerning his critics is full of immorality and unfairness how can he expect morality from other people?"⁶⁰

In recent months the government has also been exerting pressure on the independently-managed House of Cinema and its members. This pressure peaked in June 2009, following the presidential elections, when pro-government film director Farajollah Salahshor criticised the House of Cinema saying, "a greater part of the House of Cinema is concerned with seeking out and enacting promiscuity ... The members of the House of Cinema are morally corrupt ... I don't see the behaviour of the House of Cinema to be in line with the principles of Islam and the Islamic Revolution. The House of Cinema associates with people who are clearly against the regime."⁶¹ Salahshor also criticised the House of Cinema's invitation to members of the Oscar panel to visit Iran to select some films, saying, "I believe that there are hidden hands behind the curtains of the House of Cinema and that with their invitation to these 'Hollywoodian' committee members, they are attempting to provide a space for

58. Fararu, "The Controversy over Sajadpour's Statements against Film Critics," Fararu Website, March 1, 2011, <http://www.fararu.com/vdcc0pqe.2bqoo8laa2.html>.

59. Keyvan Kasirian, "Wake up Mr Sajadpour!" Cinema Paradiso (blog), March 1, 2011, <http://keyvanmovie.persianblog.ir/post/354>.

60. Ibid.

61. INN, "House of Cinema is Supporting Subversive Groups," Iran Newspaper Network, June 27, 2009, <http://www.inn.ir/newsdetail.aspx?id=20990>.

reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the West.”⁶²

In the winter of 2010, the House of Cinema filed a legal complaint against Salahshor in a court of law. He was fined a pittance: 40,000 IRR (2.36 GBP). In an interview with ISNA Jamal Khandan Koochaki, the House of Cinema’s lawyer, said, “Branch number 1057 of the Iranian court system fined Salahshor 40,000 IRR because of the insults he made against the House of Cinema members and, after our appeal, the inconsequential result did not change.”⁶³ He continued, “In addition, his verbal attack on the House of Cinema members was dismissed by the court during the hearing as it was not considered to be an important piece of evidence.”⁶⁴ Koochaki sarcastically hoped that the 40,000 IRR fine would prevent Salahshor from acting in a similar way in the future, unlikely considering that this trial occurred while he was being trialled in another case, in the same court, for plagiarism. This case is ongoing.

Mohammad Mehdi Asgarpour, the CEO of the House of Cinema, reacted to Salahshor’s statement by saying, “We have not responded to the many accusations levelled at the House of Cinema in the past but these recent accusations are different because they have a certain legal element to them. Salahshor should be made to prove who the people are that are allegedly engaging in these morally corrupt and licentious activities ... In this instance I feel compelled to respond to the accusations because its my responsibility as the representative of our members ... We will not give up ... We represent more than 95% of all

62. Ibid.

63. ISNA, "40,000 IRR Fine for Salahshor," Iranian Students’ News Agency , December 31, 2010, <http://isna.ir/isna/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1684282>.

64. Ibid.

cinema practitioners in Iran.”⁶⁵ Asgarpour continued, “Salahshor has accused us of going to parties at the British Embassy and to parties held by Soros Foundation in the US, but Salahshor should prove who out of the House of Cinema’s 4,500 members it is that he believes have attended these parties.”⁶⁶ If evidence could be found to show that members of the House of Cinema had attended these parties, then the conservatives would have ample reason to close down the organisation. Lawyer Jamal Khandan Koochaki retorted, “Salahshor has accused filmmakers of being out of line with regards to the ideals of the Iranian Revolution, but House of Cinema members have made a number of films in support of the revolutionary ideals.”⁶⁷

Salahshor, an Ahmadinejad supporter, was elected to be the Friday Prayer Committee’s honorary film director. Because of personal connections within the IRIB he received financial support to produce a series called Yoosef-e Payambar (lit. “Joseph the messenger”). Salahshor is a wealthy man, with connections to the highest powers, and therefore the 40,000 IRR indictment is a laughing matter. It seems as if the government, the judiciary system and other institutions like the IRIB are working together to suppress and constrain the House of Cinema.

Nearing the end of February 2011, Javad Shamaghdari, deputy minister of the Council of Cinema, a subsection of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, made some very radical statements against independent filmmakers and the House of Cinema. He said, “From our point of view, the House of Cinema is not a legal organisation. The House of Cinema has become

65. Aftab, "Salahshor Should Prove His Accusations Against the House of Cinema," Aftabir.com, August 18, 2009, <http://goo.gl/AOWcvc>.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

a private organisation, which is under the control of a few people. Next year we will establish an office for interaction and communication between cinema practitioners and it will become clear that I am the person who has the first and final word when it comes to Iranian cinema.”⁶⁸

Some people believe that the government is trying to close down the House of Cinema because they have been unable to make it conform to their own political ideology. When the Iranian government pumps millions of dollars into a select group of films that portray their own political standpoint, it leaves pro-reform audiences frustrated. If the House of Cinema is closed down, there will be no independent voice for cinema in Iran. Abdol Hossein Barzideh, a film director who represented the House of Cinema in the Film Council of the Ministry of Culture, resigned because he saw himself as a figurehead. Barzideh said, “My presence in that council was meaningless because the decisions had already been made by others in the ministry; they treated us like uneducated peasants.”⁶⁹

On the other hand, the House of Cinema argues that the Council of Cinema had written into its legislation that they would facilitate more spaces for the production and presentation of films and help cinema practitioners with setting procedures in place to ensure job security and the availability of the appropriate insurances. The House of Cinema has said that instead of fulfilling this responsibility, the Council of Cinema and the Ministry

68. JameJam, "House of Cinema has no Legal Position," JameJam Online, March 11, 2011, <http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100838060730>.

69. GreenVoice, "Iranian Cinema Under the the Pressure of the Dictatorship," The Green Voice of Freedom, March 17, 2011, <http://www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/mar/17/11916>.

of Culture is using its resources to defame those filmmakers that it believes are 'subversive.' Deputy Minister Shamaghdari responded to these criticisms in an interview with Fars News: "In the future, we will establish our own unions for filmmakers and cinema practitioners and the government will financially support filmmakers."⁷⁰ At the moment, the House of Cinema acts as a union for its 4,500 members and the push to close down the House of Cinema and establish government-run unions will most likely lead to further suppression as they become even more selective about who they support.

On March 11, 2011, "Haft" carried out an opinion poll via SMS about the managers of the Council of Cinema. These opinion polls were interesting because "Haft" and its presenter have always supported the Council of Cinema. The question was, "How effectively do you think the Council of Cinema carries out its work?"⁷¹ The three options were "good," "average," or "poor." More than 40% voted that their performance was average, nearly 30% voted that they were good, and 30% voted that they were poor. While the results seem insignificant, the fact that "Haft" conducted the poll in the first place was interesting. The results demonstrate that more than 70% of those who responded did not evaluate the Council of Cinema's work to be 'good.' In addition, a poll conducted by Khabar Online asked⁷² who should be voted cinema practitioner of the year and Javad Shamaghdari came in last on the list.

70. JameJam, "House of Cinema has no Legal Position," JameJam Online, March 11, 2011, <http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100838060730>.

71. Aftab, "Negative Vote for Shamaghdari," Aftab News, March 12, 2011, <http://www.aftabnews.ir/vdcdox0fnyt0xj6.2a2y.html>.

72. KhabarOnline, "Poll for Selection of Cinema Figure," Khabar Online, March 9, 2011, <http://khabaronline.ir/poll-210.aspx>.



Homayoun Asadian, who won the Crystal Simorgh for best director at the 28th Fajr Festival for his film *Gold and Copper* (2010), talked about the mistrust, fear and concerns of most of Iran's cinema practitioners towards the government in an interview with ISNA, arguing that these need to be urgently resolved.⁷³ Asadian also criticised the scheduling of film screenings in Iran, saying that if the scheduling had been better and more fair, that more audiences would have been attracted to the cinema. For example, during the month of Ramazan, when eating during daylight hours is not permitted in public, many people prefer not to go to the cinema. Films that are scheduled during this month are more likely to have a smaller audience and to fail at the box office. Asadian believes that the production and screening of "weak and superficial" films has increased over the past year and the government's increased promotion and financial support of these types of films shows that the government is not concerned about quality or craftsmanship. Asadian also urged the culture minister to think longitudinally about the future of cinema in order to ensure the production of quality films.⁷⁴ It seems that this winter has been a harsh and cold season for Iranian cinema and apathy amongst cinema practitioners is increasing steadily.

Pressure from the powers that be to segregate cinema theatres

Gender segregation is not a new concept in Iran, but it is being promoted strongly by Ahmadinejad's government and the pressure is increasing daily. After controversies surrounding

73. ISNA, "Polls of Fajr Film Festival are not Reliable," Iranian Students' News Agency, February 14, 2011, <http://isna.ir/isna/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1715272.a>

74. Ibid.



gender segregation in universities, the government are now pushing to segregate cinema audiences. In order to do this they would need to separate the theatres into three sections, a men's section, a women's section and a section for families. Although Sajadpour has clearly expressed his opposition to these propositions, it seems that the push for gender segregation is continuing. This means that the demand must come from even higher up in government. In winter 2010, gender segregation was realised on one occasion as restrictions were placed on Mohsen Amiryoussefi's film *Atashkar* ("Firekeeper"). *Atashkar* is about a husband and wife's attempt to find an appropriate contraceptive method and the wife's eventual attempt to persuade her husband to have a vasectomy. Showing films that discuss or represent these topics explicitly is still taboo in Iran, despite the increasing popularity of such operations. At a screening of the film in one of Tehran's universities, women were not permitted to enter the theatre at all and the film screened only in the presence of men.⁷⁵

Amiryoussefi reacted strongly to gender segregation being imposed on his film. He wrote an article showing his disdain for the censorship of his film saying, "this was shocking news for me. That a screening and Q&A session could be closed off to women. I used to believe that we can solve such problems with negotiation, but when I realised that this happened in one of our leading universities, I also realised that this decision could not have been made by just one person." Despite the film being screened at the 2008 International Film Festival of Kerala, *Atashkar* did not screen in Iran until nearly three years of negotiations had taken place in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The Ministry of Culture put an age restriction of 16 on the film and the film was scheduled at the worst time of the year for ticket

75. The press did not mention which university the film was screened in.

sales. Despite these problems Amiryousefi was proud: "People flocked to the cinema to see my film and people from all classes watched my film in cinemas together."⁷⁶

In this article Amiryousefi thanked audiences for going to see his film at one of the busiest times of the year for Iranian people, the weeks preceding the Iranian New Year. He continued, "Gender segregation in cinemas is something that we all want to prevent from happening."⁷⁷ Addressing his comments to whoever made the decision to prevent women from attending the screening of his film Amiryouseffi said, "You may have taken the promotional slogan for my film 'Firekeeper, a man's secret' a little too literally when making your decision. Did you even see the film? ...You should have gone to the cinema with the Iranian people first, to see them laugh at the film together, before making your decision ... Atashkar is a social and humanist film about an important issue that men and women in today's society should know about and they will find out about such things regardless of whether you want them to or not."⁷⁸

Shahla Lahiji, manager of Roshangaran Publishers, supported Amiryouseffi publicly: "These days we are told that women shouldn't see this film and it is perplexing that such advice could come from university authorities. However, this is definitely a women's issue and if for whatever reason they can't prevent pregnancy any other way, they should be aware of this operation. My observation is that there are people in small towns in Iran

76. ISNA, "Prohibiting the Presence of Women During a Student Screening of Atashkar," Iranian Students' News Agency, February 2, 2011, <http://isna.ir/isna/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1726310>.

77. Ibid.

78. ISNA, "Proibiting the Presence of Women During a Student Screening of Atashkar."

who are more intellectual than these university officials, because they have recognised the need to screen this film.”⁷⁹

Lahiji continued, “I want to tell you a story to back up my argument, a personal experience, about a trip that I went on with a UNICEF representative and a health minister 10 years ago to Yassouj, which is one of the poorest and most traditional areas of Iran ... In just one day, 50 men came voluntarily to have a vasectomy, without any financial compensation, while at the same time in India, the government are giving people radios and sacks of rice to persuade them to have the operation ... When the cooperation of the public, and their awareness is so high in such areas, how can officials think that its ok to decide on behalf of people what is suitable for them to see or not to see ... Please let women choose for themselves whether this film is something they should see.”⁸⁰

However, it seems that vocalising these complaints will not resolve anything because gender segregation is one of the cultural policies of Ahmadinejad’s government. They are attempting to push legislation through that will segregate men and women in all public places: government offices, parks, cinemas, public transport, universities and even elevators. Oppositionists believe that instead of focusing on implementing these restrictions, the cultural authorities should focus on teaching people to respect each other and to have better interpersonal relationships with each other.

79. Shargh, "A Man’s Film; A Woman’s Experience," Shargh Newspaper, March 3, 2011, <http://sharghnewspaper.ir/News/89/12/12/9182.html>.

80. Ibid.





Part Three: Theatre

- Theatre, along with the arts in general, enjoyed a period of revival during Khatami's reformist presidency
- Theatre is an insular activity, performed by intellectuals for intellectuals; the government is known to discourage activities that encourage secular thinking
- Playwrights are accustomed to creatively circumventing restrictions in order to discuss taboo topics on stage
- Some plays are being banned after they have been approved and performed a number of times
- A hardline news agency accuses a director of being 'affiliated with the CIA'
- The director and crew of Hedda Gabler are summonsed to court for 'acting against the regime'
- A performance of The Spectator Sentenced to Death turns controversial when an audience member interjects with an anti-government statement
- Conservatives are attempting to gain even more power over the arts by closing down independent organisations and unions
- As with other art forms in Iran, the government expects artists to support them in return for their financial favours

Although theatre was never officially banned following the Islamic Revolution, it has also been subject to strict censorship. Between 1997 and 2001, when the reformists were exercising their new-found power, there was a 'theatre boom' in Iran, and 200,000 theatre tickets were sold during the Fajr Theatre Festival in 2002.⁸¹ Article 19's 2006 report on censorship dedicated nine pages to its discussion of film, but only two to an overview of censorship in theatre, remarking that the most prevalent form of censorship at that time was self-censorship. Playwrights knew how to skirt Islamic law and present their topics symbolically and metaphorically in scripts and on the stage. Recently, the Iranian government has cracked down far more harshly on theatre companies and productions. 2002 was the height of Iran's theatre industry since the Islamic Revolution. One of the most controversial aspects of theatre in the eyes of the Iranian government is that it is a very insular activity. Intellectuals produce theatre, and the audience is comprised of intellectuals. It is harder to control the content of theatre than film, as even if the script has been approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, it is always possible to deviate from the official text in a live context.

As should be increasingly apparent, the government is utilising state-supported conservative media to assist their regime of suppression and censorship. Artists have always had to deal with the tough policies of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, but they have become adept at navigating the hierocracy's system. What they have not become as accustomed to is the propagation of libel against them by news agencies like Kayhan and Fars News. Today practitioners of all art forms in Iran must be on high alert regarding the potential reactions

81. Article 19, ed. *Art and Censorship in Iran*, pp. 28.

and impediments of such news agencies and media. There is no single area of culture and arts that has remained unscathed by the harassment of Ahmadinejad's government, and the winter of 2011 has been no exception for theatre practitioners, as they have endured some of the most heavy-handed censorship and suppression in the history of the Islamic Republic.

In January 2011, Tehran's City Theatre was forced to cancel their season of *Hedda Gabler*, the classic Henrik Ibsen play. The play had opened on January 5 and was banned six days later by Iranian authorities. Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi, Tehran's chief prosecutor, stated that the play was 'vulgar' and 'hedonistic' and argued, "We should make society's cultural atmosphere healthy. We will confront any activities that endanger the cultural security of society."⁸² In response to the play's ban, the managing board of the House of Theatre wrote a letter to Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, the Minister of Culture, informing him of the consequences of such heavy-handed censorship: "Recent events have been a serious blow to the job security and peace of mind of theatre practitioners."⁸³ The House of Theatre declared that as the only non-governmental union and the only legal recourse of theatre artists, it is obligated to pursue the violated rights of its members through legal channels. The banning of *Hedda Gabler* was one of the most significant instances of state intervention in Iranian theatre, and this occurrence demonstrates that the art form is under strict scrutiny and observation.

The controversy surrounding *Hedda Gabler* started when Fars

82. Reuters, ">Hedonistic< Hedda Gabler Banned at Tehran Theatre," Reuters, January 12, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/12/us-stage-iran-ban-idUSTRE70B5PG20110112>.

83. Kaleme, "Letter From the House of Theatre to the Culture Minister," Kaleme Website, January 17, 2011, <http://www.kaleme.com/1389/10/27/klm-44040/>.

News published a critical review of the play on January 9, 2011, after four days of performances.⁸⁴ The image heading the report depicted a male and female character leaning toward each other, seemingly in the throes of a precursor to a kiss.⁸⁵ Fars News stated, “[this theatre company is] promoting permissiveness, vulgarisation, the normalisation of having more than one husband, the free mingling of men and women and the use of symbols of a pervert sect known for sexual slavery and freemasonry.” In addition, Kayhan wrote a brief article in which Vahid Rahbani, the director of Hedda Gabler was said to be “against Islamic values” and “affiliated with the CIA.”⁸⁶ These very public criticisms against the play were so harsh that the Minister of Culture was cornered into denouncing libel of this level.

However, his efforts were futile, as Dolatabadi reported shortly thereafter that a legal case had been filed against the director and the crew of the banned play summoning them to court to defend accusations of acting against the regime.⁸⁷ Although this was not the first time that a play had been banned, the conservatives have been less successful in removing productions from the stage so quickly in the past. The severity of the public criticisms clearly shows the turbulent times of this recent state

84. Fars, "Promoting Sexual Deviance in Theatres," Fars News Agency, January 9, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8910191096>.

85. A series of pictures of a performance of Hedda Gabler taken by Ehsan Rafati are available online at <http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2011/01/12/photos-the-play-hedda-gabler-in-tehrans-city-hall-theatre-stopped-for-moral-review/>. The pictures show how the theatre company skirt the restrictions of the Islamic government by using female actresses to play both the male and female lead roles.

86. Fars, "CIA's Gift for Theatre," Fars News Agency, January 16, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8910261117>.

87. RadioFarda, "Director and Crew of Hedda Gabler at Court," Radio Farda Website, January 13, 2011, http://www.radiofarda.com/content/o2_iranian_authorities_suspended_atheatre/2274505.html.



of cultural emergency, and it sees that theatre practitioners are enduring far harsher working conditions, without hope for the situation improving in the near future.

The pre-review process, a frustrating and paralysing inconvenience for theatre practitioners

While Hedda Gabler received its licence for public performance after enduring the strict pre-review process, and did manage to appear on stage briefly, some plays are either never staged, have their permissions revoked, or are altered beyond recognition during the pre-performance review phase. The Spectator Sentenced to Death, a play by contemporary Romanian author Matei Vişniec and directed by Ruhollah Jafari, could not gain approval for performance during the 2010 Fajr Festival, receiving its licence for public viewing months later after four lengthy reviews. The Spectator Sentenced to Death takes place in a court in which the concept of justice is presented as a victim, and values and laws are presented for moral scrutiny.

A performance of The Spectator Sentenced to Death quickly turned controversial when an audience member interjected with a politically-charged statement during the show, turning the play into a reflection of the current sociopolitical climate in Iran. During the play the judge says to the prosecutor, “Can you call this criminal something so that we are convinced he is a criminal?” According to news reports an audience member rose to his feet and interjected, “You should call him khavaas-e bi basirat [lit. ‘the ignorant elite’]!”⁸⁸ Khavaas-e bi basirat is a critical term first used by Khamenei to describe reform-minded members of parliament who used to be supporters of the conservative regime. It is a

88. KhabarOnline, “‘The Ignorant Elite’ in ‘The Spectator Sentenced to Death,’” Khabar Online, March 8, 2011, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-135813.aspx>.

harsh statement that indicates some form of treason or betrayal has been carried out. For example, Khamenei recently referred to Rafsanjani, who was the Iranian president before Khatami and was known to be conservative, as 'khavas-e bi basirat.' This title was bestowed upon Rafsanjani because he refused to condemn the protests following the 2009 elections or to denounce opposition leaders like Mousavi and Karroubi; the regime was hoping he would do both.

The interaction between the audience member and the actors reminded them of the months of hardship they had endured whilst seeking permission to perform the play. Jafari, the play's director, said, "In just one of our pre-performance reviews we received a list of 41 amendments that we had to make before being reconsidered ... We had to remove a female character from the play. The authorities said she was objectionable because she owned a coffee shop and had a flirtatious personality."⁸⁹ Pro-government media described the performance as an "explicit insult to the Islamic Revolution."⁹⁰ These accusations mirror those that were levelled at Hedda Gabler.

Jahan News, a conservative news website, wrote, "Not long has passed since the performance of obscene plays like Hedda Gabler and Antigone and we are again observing yet another example of problematic performances."⁹¹ Jahan News continued, "These days some theatre practitioners are thinking in line with the ideals and beliefs of the Green Movement, they are opposing the system

89. Mehr, "The Spectator Sentenced to Death's Idea is Universal," Mehr News Agency, March 6, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1268059>.

90. Jahan, "Theatre's Explicit Insult to the Islamic Revolution," Jahan News, March 9, 2011, <http://www.jahannews.com/vdcgyy9qqak9nt4.rpra.html>.

91. Ibid.

and they are using these opportunities and the money of the government itself, to oppose the government.”⁹²

Despite the suffocating atmosphere that already exists in Iran, which stifles creativity and prevents the natural evolution of art communities, conservatives believe that they do not have enough control and are demanding more power. From the perspective of practitioners, these crackdowns cause confusion, disorientation, uncertainty and frustration. Pro-government Jahan News has also written, “During the time that the government’s control over theatre has decreased, plays have started depicting very dark and sinister social situations in the context of an unknown location or anonymous country to bypass censorship ... However, at the same time, by using symbolic rhetoric during the performance, they are making it clear that the subject of the performance and their scrutiny is Iran. We believe that in this situation the Ministry of Culture is also responsible because they are being careless during the pre-review process and are allowing theatre directors to oppose the government and the system on stage.”⁹³

These conservative websites even criticised Rafsanjani’s daughter, who attended a performance of *The Spectator Sentenced to Death*. Mashregh News, by publishing a photo of Faezeh Hashemi in the theatre’s audience, attempted to demonstrate the pro-reform tendencies and Green Movement allegiances of this theatre. In an interview with ISNAMohammad Yaghoobi, a famous theatre director, described theatre’s unclear future: “How can we even think about our next project when the paperwork for the project we finished a few months ago has still not been processed.”

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.



A festival that was not a festival

The end of winter signals the beginning of the Fajr Theatre Festival. This year theatre practitioners did not agree with the government's statement that it was "a truly international festival."⁹⁴ One of the most sinister events during the Fajr Theatre Festival was the arrest and interrogation of some foreign guests who were accused of 'espionage.' At the time of their arrest the foreign guests were moving towards City Theatre Hall. Those arrested said that they were repeatedly and forcefully asked to confess to being spies.⁹⁵

In the past months, a number of theatre artists have spoken out against the government's poor management of the Fajr Festival. Majid Sarsangi, one of the masters of theatre in Iran and the secretary of the 26th Fajr Theatre Festival (2008), said, "The roots of theatre in Iran are dying and we are just polishing its leaves!"⁹⁶ Actor Masoud Delkhah, who won an award at this year's festival, contradicted Sarsangi's statement in an interview with PressTV, the international arm of Iran's hardline media arsenal: "I think the quality of plays were [sic] pretty good. It was more organised than other international Fajr Festivals in previous years."⁹⁷

Qutbuddin Sadeqi, playwright, director and lecturer of theatre,

94. JameJamOnline, "Fajr Theatre Festival is a Truly International Festival," JameJam Newspaper Website, February 18, 2011, <http://www.jamejamonline.ir/newstext.aspx?newsnum=100836151287>.

95. Alarabya, "Foreign Guests at the Fajr Theatre Festival were Arrested," Alarabya News Channel Website, February 17, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/02/17/138043.html>.

96. GreenVoice, "Ahmadinejad has Ruined the Roots of Theatre in Iran," The Green Voice of Freedom, February 2, 2011, <http://www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/feb/22/11257>.

97. GHN/MRS, "Intl. Fajr Theatre Festival Concludes," PressTV, February 22, 2011, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/166416.html>.



has said that the government's primary concern seems to be with seeking endorsement and support from the people through their cultural activities, rather than with the promotion of cultural activities themselves. Sadeqi said that the government expects artists to support them in return for these financial 'favours.' This is one of the government's weaknesses; it should not expect anything in return for this assistance, which is made possible only through public funds. Sadeqi said: "As with governmental subsidies for gas, wheat, bread and sugar, there should be no expectation for the favours to be reciprocated ... This is the worst kind of intervention by the government and I think the government is so busy with traffic, wheat, politics and borders that it had better not interfere with culture and the arts. This is the domain of imagination, thought and analysis; this is a field for innovation, so let the artists do their work." He continued, "In the field of arts, culture and thought, you need to do analysis. You have to highlight wrongdoings. You have to criticise. Can you show one single masterpiece that does not contain criticisms and does not highlight wrongdoings and shortcomings? This is one of the biggest duties of culture and art. Our government assumes that artists are subversive and they say that if you want to prove that you are not subversive, you have to endorse us. This is not possible. If we do this, our work will lose its original, cultural and analytical aspect and will turn into a propaganda machine, making our role worthless."⁹⁸

98. MardomSalari, "Government Concerns About its Own Publicity," Mardom Salari Newspaper, February 24, 2011, <http://www.mardomsalari.com/template1/Article.aspx?AID=15451#99496>.





Part Four: Music

- Music is controversial in Iran because of its contested status in Islam
- The religious authorities perceive music to be as harmful to society as drug addiction
- During Khatami's presidency pro-government pop groups were given authorisation to perform, but the conservative authorities are cracking down again
- Most musicians prefer to release their music independently using the internet than endure the lengthy and arbitrary pre-review process
- Music as a research endeavour is permissible, and Iran's universities have music education programmes, however music for enjoyment is still taboo
- A number of Iran's prominent musicians boycott the 2011 Fajr Festival
- Women's music ensembles are seen as 'decorative' at the Fajr Festival
- Classical Iranian musician Shajarian's album gets stuck in the review office of the Ministry of Culture as they deliberate; this is punishment for his public support of the Green Movement
- The national orchestra has no conductor
- Ahmadinejad's chief of staff supports music, but only in a scientific way: "Music is a difficult science with calculations"

Of all of the art forms, music has suffered the most repression and censorship in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is largely due to debates surrounding its legitimacy in Islam and to the legacy of music being perceived as part of the shah's attempts to westernise Iran. Imam Khomeini has been reported to have said "music is more harmful than opium."⁹⁹ This statement demonstrates how tough the Islamic Republic is when dealing with music. After the revolution the ultraconservative newspaper Keyhan wrote, "Music is like a drug, whoever acquired the habit can no longer devote himself to important activities ... We must eliminate music because it means betraying our country and our youth. We must completely eliminate it."¹⁰⁰

The current climate is so convoluted that even musicians close to the establishment are loathful of government policies. This is why a large number of Iranian musicians have begun performing unofficial or 'underground' music. As with all of the art forms discussed above, the authorities have recognised the power inherent in music and during Khatami's presidency certain pop groups were given permission to perform music in public. Very few permits are given to pop musicians, and although genres such as instrumental jazz, fusion and soft rock and pop are performed occasionally, most musical performances in Iran are of classical, folk or traditional music.

Performing, producing or distributing music not approved by the government has serious repercussions, and many practitioners have been forced to leave Iran, including singer Mohsen Namjoo, and the bands 127, Hypernova, Take it Easy Hospital and the

99. Parsine, "Music is more Harmful than Opium." Parsine News Site, February 26, 2011, <http://www.parsine.com/fa/pages/?cid=33001>.

100. In Article 19, ed. Art and Censorship in Iran, pp. 42.



Yellow Dogs. Bahman Ghobadi, a well known Iranian director both inside and outside Iran, directed the Cannes audience favourite No One Knows About Persian Cats (2009, Wild Bunch), a film about Tehran's unofficial rock music scene. The film featured musicians from a number of illegal rock bands in the starring roles and was produced without permission; neither Ghobadi nor the musicians feel safe returning to Iran.

Censorship is stopping Iranian music from moving forward

In February 2010 Hossein Alizadeh, one of Iran's leading composers, spoke in a meeting with journalists and music practitioners in Hormoz province: "Censorship, and the lengthy application process that must be negotiated in order to perform music in public, is stopping Iranian music from evolving."¹⁰¹ Alizadeh, addressing the ruling authorities, continued, "They should not try to control music by distracting the minds of our artists and attempting to control what they think or do."¹⁰² Referring to the ultra-conservative first years of the Islamic Republic of Iran he continued, "After the revolution they closed down music schools and stopped live performances in Iran for ten years. Fortunately they still allowed Iranian musicians to perform concerts in other countries and through these opportunities our musicians introduced Iranian culture and music to outsiders ... Today no international music festival would be complete without performances of Iranian music."¹⁰³

101 VOAPNN, "Censorship has Harmful Affects on Iranian Music," Voice of America Persian News Network, March 12, 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/persian/news/iran-music-alizadeh-12-03-2011-117861934.html>.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

Alizadeh also illustrated a system of double standards and discrimination in Iran, saying, “We have to ask the cultural authorities why some music is getting performance permissions in Tehran, but the same music is not getting permission to be performed in another city. This shows discrimination on the part of the government between the people of Tehran and the people of other cities.”¹⁰⁴ Many musical performances scheduled for smaller towns have been stopped or banned as a result of pressure from the leaders of Friday prayers or the commanders of the Revolutionary Guard Corps either the night before or on the very day of the performance. Hossein Alizadeh added, “Unfortunately, many individuals in smaller towns make arbitrary and hasty decisions about music. If they wish, they allow the concert to happen and if they do not, they just cancel it as they wish.”¹⁰⁵

The convoluted permission-seeking process, double standards and overbearing regional discrimination is having a negative effect on the evolution of music within Iran. Alizadeh argues, “If we had diversity in Iranian music, and a democratic-thinking government ... then not just one person would be able to decide what is music and what is not music based on personal or religious preferences.”¹⁰⁶ Tehran-based record label Hermes was finally given permission to release Alizadeh’s album *Be Tamasha-ye Ab-ha-ye Sefid* (Endless Vision, 2005) after a year of the recording “sitting in Ershad’s screening office.”¹⁰⁷

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. VOAPNN, "Censorship has Harmful Affects on Iranian Music."

107. Shadi Vatanparast, "Fajr Music Festival, Alireza Assar’s Concert and Pezhvak Sounds Again ," Tehran Avenue, January 2005, <http://www.tehranavenue.com/print.php?ln=en&id=311>.

Music in Iran is strictly censored due to its controversial status within Islam and the perception of it as a harmful and toxic branch of westernisation. If these problems are not addressed then the frustration of musicians will further escalate. Each president of the Islamic Republic of Iran has formed his own Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and they have all had differing opinions concerning music, drawing upon the diverse and often contradictory views of religious scholars and clerics to justify their policies. Drawing on different religious interpretations or fatwas to suit their own intentions has given the government the freedom to act however suits them. The conflicts and ambiguity between ruling authorities, religious authorities and the Iranian people have become even more evident following the 2009 presidential elections. Usually when attacks are levelled against music the ruling authorities make reference to religious fatwas in order to justify their stricture, but there is never any attempt to foster a dialogue between musicians and the religious authorities about the state of music in Iran.

In an interview with ILNA news agency, Ali Akbar Moradi, a famous composer and tanbour player, said, "It has been the musicians themselves who have kept the flame of music burning for all these years. The cultural authorities have done nothing but exploit music for their own profit."¹⁰⁸ Moradi has asked parliament to clarify the legal status of music and has argued that the existence of numerous educational institutes for music throughout Iran demonstrates that most authorities have no problem with music progressing, particularly in an academic form. However, it is not clear why there are so many different sources informing decision-making in Iran, when only a small

108. ILNA, "Shajarian is Still Waiting for Permission to Distribute His Album," Iranian Labour News Agency, March 8, 2011, <http://www.ilna.ir/newstext.aspx?ID=184098>.

minority of people are making cultural decisions on behalf of an immensely populated country.

Controversy surrounds this year's Fajr Festival

Before this year's Fajr Festival of Music (February 21st - 27th, 2011) the Ministry of Culture announced that pop music would be including in the program, but that it would be removed from the competition section of the festival.¹⁰⁹ Hamed Shahabadi, the deputy minister of art justified this move by stating, "Pop music is a genre that is not compatible with our norms and values. This music is damaging our own national music. That is why we removed pop music from the competition section of the festival."¹¹⁰ Pop music entered the competition section of the 23rd Fajr Music Festival (2008) after being reviewed in the 'research' section for three years.¹¹¹ Pop singer Khashayar Etemadi said, "Right now, there are a lot of obstacles for pop music. This genre of music is prevalent in society but no consistent rulings have been made either for or against it."¹¹²

Frustrated and overwhelmed by the government's harsh crackdowns on music in recent months, many musicians opted to boycott the festival. Speaking with the press, Hossein Alizadeh said, "It seems that many of the works performed in the festival are actually government commissions ... Music is an art that

109. Tabnak, "Pop Music has been Removed from Fajr Music Festival," Tabnak News Site, December 26, 2010, <http://goo.gl/gnNUq>.

110. Ibid.

111. Images of some of the performers, including the mixed gender pop group Arian Band are available online at <http://www.payvand.com/news/08/jan/1007.html>

112. KhabarOnline, "Pop Music is in a Vague State," Khabar Online, July 21, 2009, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-77579.aspx>.



must not be commissioned or constrained and I believe that the political aspect of the Fajr Music Festival has come to the forefront this year.”¹¹³ He added, “The only way for musicians to express their protest is to refrain from attending this festival.”¹¹⁴

Amongst the famous musicians who withdrew their performances and/or compositions from the 26th Fajr Music Festival were Shahram Nazeri, Jalil Shahnaz, Hossein Alizadeh, Kayhan Kalhor, Daryoush Talaei, Majid Kiani, Houshang Zarif, Jala Zulfunoun, Masoud Shoari, Mohammad Mousavi, the Kamkar family, the Pournazeri family, Homayoun Khorram, Ali Akbar Moradi, Majid Entezami, Homayoun Shajarian, Husammoddin Seraj, Seddigh Tarif, Alireza Ghorbani, and Fereydoun Shahbazian.

Women’s music ensembles have been included in the Fajr Music Festival for many years, however the restrictions placed on the music they are able to perform are even greater. There are certain instruments that a woman cannot play (for example, a drum kit) and women singers must sing in groups, as the solo female voice is the authorities believe it to be too provocative to be heard by men. Solo female singers can only perform in front of audiences comprising women. Female performers have expressed dissatisfaction over the scheduling of their events, and have said that their inclusion in the festival has been merely ornamental and on the fringes of the festival.

Pari Maleki, leader of the Khonya ensemble, said, “One of the reasons why performances involving women were not well received is that it they were allocated the worst times in

113. GreenVoice, "Fajr Music Festival is Boycotted by the Music Elite," The Green Voice of Freedom, February 18, 2011, <http://www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/feb/18/11085>.

114. Ibid.

the schedule.”¹¹⁵ Maleki added that the root of the additional obstacles facing women is the male-domination of the music industry. The added restrictions placed on female musicians by the government, the poor scheduling and lack of promotion for their music, and the gender segregation of audiences further contributes to the reception and perception of their music as ‘ornamental,’ superfluous and inferior.

It would be wrong to assume that the ruling authorities are only on bad terms with pop music. Even traditional, folk and classical musicians face such obstacles and restrictions. Following the presidential elections, hardliners severely attacked Mohammad Reza Shajarian, arguably the most famous practitioner of Iranian traditional music. Shajarian has openly expressed his support for the Green Movement and spoke out publicly against Ahmadinejad, who called the protesters ‘thugs.’¹¹⁶ In reaction to Shajarian’s support of the Green Movement, his recording of the religious piece “Rabbana,” a popular prayer for the month of Ramadan, was removed from television.

The uncertainty surrounding Shajarian’s latest album

Shajarian’s boycott of this year’s Fajr Festival is one of the ways that he has expressed his dissatisfaction with the decisions of the Iranian government concerning cultural activities. The uncertainty surrounding the public release of Shajarian’s latest album is an example of how the government is fighting back against

115. MardomSalari, "The Worst Times in the Schedule for Women Concerts," Mardom Salari Newspaper, February 5, 2011, <http://www.mardomsalari.com/template1/News.aspx?NID=99495>.

116. BBCPersian, "Voice of <Thugs,>" BBC Persian Website, June 16, 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/06/090616_mz_shajarian_irib.shtml.



musicians it perceives to be 'subversive.' In 2008 the songs from *Morgh-e Khoshkhan* (lit. 'sweet singing bird') were performed in the concert hall of the interior ministry to an audience of 3,000 people with government approval. Despite its previous public appearance, ILNA News Agency reported in March 2011 that the album, which was sent off to the Ministry of Culture in 2009 with an application for a permit to produce and distribute, had still not received any feedback. Shajarian's manager Mohammad Ali Rafiye said that before the 2009 elections it would take about two months for a Shajarian album to get production and distribution permissions, whereas they have now been waiting for more than a year to distribute this album.¹¹⁷ Rafiye said that the delays being imposed by the government have meant they have decided to investigate the possibilities of distributing the album outside Iran instead and at the time of writing the album has still not been released.

It seems as though Shajarian is being punished for distancing himself from the conservative authorities through a letter he wrote to the Ezzatollah Zarghami, the managing director of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, on June 17th, 2009. In the letter he wrote, "Your excellency knows that the songs of mine that you repeatedly broadcast have been performed for the Iran of 1979 and 1980. There is no connection between the songs and the present situation ... according to Sharia and the law of Iran, it is obligatory that IRIB stop broadcasting my songs and other works immediately."¹¹⁸

117. ILNA, "Shajarian is Still Waiting for Permission to Distribute His Album," Iranian Labour News Agency, March 8, 2011, <http://www.ilna.ir/newstext.aspx?ID=184098>.

118. Mehr, "Shajarian Asks IRIB to Stop Airing His Works," Mehr News Agency, June 17, 2009, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=898474>.

The IRIB uses Shajarian's music as background music, often with religious or political images of their choice used as aesthetic accompaniments to his works. This is because according to Shia rulings the IRIB has not been allowed to broadcast images of musical instruments. At the instigation of the Islamic Republic, when this rule first came into force, it was most common to match a video of a vase of flowers to the music track. Nowadays the IRIB's graphic department are getting more creative, animating drawings over recordings of concerts in order to obscure the instruments but not the performers.¹¹⁹ The music department of the IRIB has been actively producing music for a number of years but the question is 'how can an organisation dedicated to music be comfortable with the prohibition of the visual representation of musical instruments within its own organisation?' National television's music department has its own symphonic orchestra, a classical Iranian orchestra, and Azeri, Kurdish and Lori music groups. In an interview with Miras Khabar, Shahram Monazami, conductor of the broadcaster's classical Iranian orchestra, said, "Not showing musical instruments during IRIB broadcasts is an issue that is separate from the music department of the IRIB, because production and broadcasting policies are not decided on by individual departments."¹²⁰

Shajarian has said to BBC Persian, "Religion has considered music to be its competitor for a long time in our country."¹²¹ The

119. A video demonstrating the creative obfuscation of musical instruments was posted by 'Tapesh,' an Iranian.com user on April 22, 2010. It can be found at <http://www.iranian.com/main/blog/tapesh/how-music-instruments-showed-iranian-tv>, accessed May 16, 2011.

120. CHN, "Contradictory Policies of IRIB in Production and Broadcasting of Music," Cultural Heritage News Agency, March 2, 2011, <http://www.chn.ir/News/?Section=2&id=52161>.

121. Shajarian: *The Echo of our Time* (London: BBCPersian, 2010), BBC

use of Shajarian's songs to promote conservative ideals following the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections demonstrates that the government are more than happy to use music for their own means when necessary. While it is common for the permission-seeking process to take an extraordinarily long time for pop and rock musicians in Iran, with their applications most often resulting in denial, this is the first time that one of Iran's most famous classical musicians or composers has been subjected to the same amount of scrutiny during the application process. As this section has demonstrated, traditional musicians also face many difficulties, but their main concern is that the government does not seriously support them.

A conductor for the national orchestra?

During recent months, the repeated and undue interference of the Ministry of Culture in the process of selecting a conductor for the National Orchestra has resulted in Iran having no conductor at all for its national symphony orchestra. The Technical Council is the authority responsible for choosing a conductor for the orchestra and musicians have little say over who gets chosen. Orchestra musicians have been complaining for a long time about the inconveniences caused by the interventions of the Ministry of Culture in the 'technical aspects' of the orchestra. In a press conference Hossein Alizadeh said, "Unfortunately, in all these years, they have not only disregarded music, but they have also pushed music out of its correct path. An orchestra can only function when you have competent players and trained conductors and composers. These activities should start in high schools and authorities should be able to cater for these needs.

Persian, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2010/05/100510_150_shajarian_promo.shtml.

Such shortcomings must be overcome so that our players do not feel that they are just like factory workers. Today, the orchestra requires better facilities and more support in order to function better and to provide the best music for our country."¹²² He added, "A national orchestra is not just for 'national music.' It is a patriotic issue per se ... What kind of nation are you if you don't have a national orchestra?!"¹²³

Not all influential Iranian politicians and religious authorities are against music. Esfandiyar Mashaei's remarks about music caused outrage in Qom, one of the country's most religious cities, but in recent months he has defended his position about music saying, "Some people do not know what music really is and think that music is only the popular songs of weddings. Music is a difficult science with calculations, instruments, melodies, lyrics and rhythms."¹²⁴ Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, one of Qom's Grand Ayatollahs, considered the remarks of Esfandiyar Mashaei to be an insult to the clerics. Mashaei retorted, "I will repeat what I have said a hundred thousand times. The people who condemn music do not know anything about music at all; 'vulgar music' is only a small drop in the huge ocean of music."¹²⁵

Mashaei, Ahamdinejad's Chief of Staff had said earlier, "Some people do not know music and are not familiar with the poetry of Hafez and Sa'di and the value of the Shahnama ... These

122. ISNA, "Reopening of the National Orchestra," Iranian Students' News Agency, December 19, 2010, <http://isna.ir/isna/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1676664>.

123. Ibid.

124. Jahan, "Mashaei's Comments About Music," Jahan News, December 29, 2010, <http://www.jahannews.com/vdcawwn6a49nmo1.k5k4.html>.

125. GreenVoice, "Hard Days for the Iranian Music," The Green Voice of Freedom, December 30, 2010, www.irangreenvoice.com/article/2010/dec/30/9771.

people have no experience of love at all.”¹²⁶ He addressed those who condemned his statements saying, “You are saying your prayers in the wrong direction ... You have no understanding of music because you are incapable of understanding the world of poetry and art.”¹²⁷

126. KhabarOnline, "Some People do not Understand Music and Think it Should be Forbidden," Khabar Online, December 9, 2010, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-114639.aspx>.

127. Ibid.

Summary and Conclusion

Despite a period of relative reform during Khatami's presidency (1997-2004), the current era in Iran is one of increased restrictions on arts and culture. Following the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections, after which many questioned the legitimacy of the declared outcome, the conservative government has begun retaliating against its opposition through a stifling regime of increased censorship and suppression. Books that are not in line with the government's ideology are being removed from the shelves and replaced with those that do. Through the sponsorship and promotion of books that the government deems to be harmonious with their hardline aspirations, literature is becoming increasingly one-sided. Vast funds are bequeathed to those authors and publishers believed to be in support of the government while publishers and authors acting independently of the government receive little support or encouragement as they face foreign sanctions, cut subsidies, censorship and

suppression. As publishers compensate for cost increases, quality is compromised, and this is what will cause the most longitudinal damage to the publishing industry in Iran. The government's arbitrary revocation of publishing licences, the banning of books previously given approval for publishing, and the public slander of 'subversive' authors is contributing to an atmosphere of confusion and anxiety amongst independent publishers and authors who have little hope for their futures.

Cinema was one of the first art forms to be approved after the revolution, because the government immediately recognised its potential as a tool for propaganda. Not much has changed, and despite the reform era supporting some of the most creative and innovative Iranian films, it has become increasingly difficult over the past six years for filmmakers to accomplish their goals. Personal attacks against cinema practitioners are increasing, and with the arrest of famous directors such as Jafar Panahi, who the government sees as a fervent Green Movement supporter and therefore 'subversive,' those in the industry are understandably concerned about the future of cinema. As was the case with Afkhami's film about Khomeini, the government are happy to use the power of cinema for their own benefit, but they want to control the stories that they tell, and they may not have it both ways. Many critics of Iranian cinema, particularly those close to the government, are concerned that directors are portraying negative depictions of Iran outside of the country with 'dark' and depressing film topics. But with the current state of cultural affairs in Iran, it is little wonder that many of the story lines are macabre.

Theatre in Iran is currently enduring some of the most heavy-handed censorship and suppression that has occurred throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. Plays have been banned, and

theatres, directors and affiliates have been slandered in state-supported conservative media. Court actions against those who take criticisms too far are laughed off by the hardliners, and the severity of the public criticisms clearly shows the turbulent nature of this cultural emergency. The pre-review process, in all cultural arenas but especially in theatre, is disfiguring classic plays such as Hedda Gabler. Directors are forced to remove certain characters from the production if they are deemed to be immoral, amend and dull down the script, and to be non-provocative. A recurring theme is the criticism of practitioners seen to be in support of the Green Movement, and many of Iran's artists and intellectuals are.

Out of all of the art forms, music has been the most harshly repressed due to its historically controversial status within Islam and its association with the attempts made by the shah to westernise Iran. Although classical, traditional and folk music has been permitted for many years, the government is now cracking down on all forms of music in order to exert complete control. Again, they are attacking those who they believe are in support of the Green Movement. Mohammad Reza Shajarian, Iran's most famous and most liked classical Iranian musician, has been used and abused by the Iranian government. When it suits them, they have used his music both for prayer and propaganda, however, following his dissatisfaction with the authorities after the 2009 elections, they have prevented the distribution of his album. The pre-review process is stringent for theatre, cinema, books and music, however a process that used to take Iran's most famous musician no longer than two months, has now lasted more than a year. With no imminent release date for his album, Shajarian, like many of Iran's musicians, is turning to alternate means such as the internet and foreign distribution companies in an attempt to have his voice heard.

The Fajr Festival, which schedules the ‘best’ of the country’s music, theatre and film over the course of one week at the beginning of each year, is a marker post for the sociocultural and political climate. During this year’s festival controversies abounded, as neither critics nor government-supporters were happy with the festival’s outcome. Independent unions and organisations are feeling pressurised as the government attempts to make them obsolete or to force them into submission. This leaves independent artists little choice than to conform or to leave Iran; many have left, with no hope of returning home under the present regime.

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The condition of culture in [redacted] Iran is moving towards what can only be described as a 'state of [redacted]'. This report [redacted] some of the major concerns in the fields of literature, cinema, theatre and music in Iran by examining the reactions of audiences and [redacted] to the policies of the conservative Iranian government. Although most of the cited [redacted] examples are from recent months and reflect on the [redacted] and political climate following the controversial result of the 2009 presidential elections, they are historically grounded and have been occurring since the instigation of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

In fact, the monarchy also exerted its [redacted] power through censorship before the [redacted] revolution. At the time of writing it is early 2011 and the events surrounding this year's Fajr Festivals of Theatre, Film and Music, and the annual Tehran Book Fair have been [redacted] as important illustrations of [redacted] current state of affairs.

Cultural Censorship in Iran

Iranian Culture in a State of Emergency

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