

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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Women in the Iranian Election Campaign and Protest

Introduction

Kendra Heideman, Intern, Middle East Program

Women played a prominent role throughout each phase of Iran's disputed June 2009 presidential election, including its aftermath. They were actively courted by the candidates. Two candidates in particular, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, promised to address women's rights issues and grant women cabinet seats if they were elected. In addition, Mousavi was joined by his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, on the campaign trail in an act that underscored his commitment to a broad program for improving women's rights, including his previous vow to review laws that discriminate against women. In these largely unprecedented campaign moves directed at women, the reformist candidates displayed their recognition of women's power to influence politics in Iran and specifically the June election. Such changes in campaigning on the reformist side contrasted the traditional campaigning style of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

and called attention to the lack of progress on regressive policies regarding women's rights in Iran since Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005.

Women were also active in the campaign, voted in large numbers, and later joined the post-election protests despite the risk of arrest and in defiance of the batons, clubs, and guns of government security forces. The picture of Neda Agha-Soltan, shot and bleeding to death on June 20, 2009 on a Tehran street, became the iconic image of the protest movement. Another lasting symbol was the use of the color green by members of the Green Movement, a movement that had started before the election and turned into a protest movement in response to the disputed election and government crackdown on post-election protests, with significant participation from women and pro-women reformist candidates Mousavi and Karroubi. Leading women activists and journalists have been among the thousands arrested by the Iranian government in opposition protests since the election. Months after the June

About the Middle East Program

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of all aspects of developments within the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; arms proliferation; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts meetings on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

- **Gender Issues:** The Middle East Program devotes considerable attention to the role of women in advancing civil society and to the attitudes of governments and the clerical community toward women's rights in the family and society at large. The Program examines employment patterns, education, legal rights, and political participation of women in the region. The Program also has a keen interest in exploring women's increasing roles in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction activities..
- **Current Affairs:** The Middle East Program emphasizes analysis of current issues and their implications for long-term developments in the region, including: Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy, Iran's political and nuclear ambitions, the presence of American troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf and their effect on the region, human rights violations, globalization, economic and political partnerships, and U.S. foreign policy in the region.
- **Islam, Democracy and Civil Society:** The Middle East Program monitors the growing demand of people in the region for democratization, political participation, accountable government, the rule of law, and adherence by their governments to international conventions, human rights and women's rights. It continues to examine the role of Islamic movements in shaping political and social developments and the variety of factors that favor or obstruct the expansion of civil society.

The following papers are based on the authors' presentations at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on July 13, 2009. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

presidential election, the Green Movement has remained a resilient voice of opposition to the Ahmadinejad government because of the considerable and continued involvement of women.

To address the role of women in the 2009 presidential election in Iran, the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars hosted a panel discussion on July 13, 2009 on “Women in the Iranian Election Campaign and Protest.” The speakers examined the roots and implications of the unusual role women played in the politics of the June election.

In “Iran’s Presidential Elections: Women’s Role in the Pre- and Post-Election Politics,” Nayereh Tohidi contends that while women played a visible, active and seemingly unprecedented role in the June 2009 elections and post-election demonstrations, the women’s political movement in Iran has been evolving for more than a century. After reviewing the significant political and social developments since the 1979 Revolution, she discusses the current women’s movement as diverse, non-ideological, pro-democratic and dedicated to collective activism. Through analysis of women’s participation in the Green Movement, Tohidi highlights how the Iranian regime is suffering from a legitimacy crisis and extended distrust while calls for democracy are becoming connected to advancements in gender politics.

Norma Claire Moruzzi presents a historical and social foundation of Iranian women’s role in politics, providing context to their role in the recent election in “Quiet Leadership and Pressure from Below: Women’s Participation in Iranian Public Life.” She details the progression of women’s rights and conditions in Iran since the Revolution. Identifying several unprecedented changes in women’s role in the 2009 presidential campaign and election, Moruzzi highlights the cooperation of secular and reformist women’s groups and the presence of Zahra Rahnavard as two significant advancements. Additionally, she argues that women’s involvement in the post-election demonstrations further signifies an increasingly integrated and bottom-up movement within Iranian society.

In “Women in Iran’s Green Movement: Their Role in the 2009 Presidential Election Protest,” Fatemeh Haghighatjoo features Iranian women as agents of change and points to their involve-



ment on the front lines of post-election protests. She provides a background of women’s extraordinary influence on the election campaign, emphasizing the candidates’ promises to improve women’s rights and increase gender equality. Observing how Iranian women have become increasingly aware of the absence of their social, political, and legal rights through shared experiences and hardships, Haghighatjoo underscores the women’s collective spirit of resistance that continues to empower women and drive the reformist Green Movement. She concludes that these united and determined women, through a non-violent approach, are struggling to transform their society.

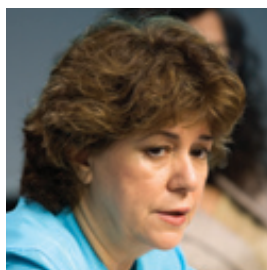
Pari Esfandiari highlights the role of the media in covering women’s participation in the elections and post-election protests in “Reporting Chaos,” focusing specifically on the online media platform IranDokht. Her paper spans IranDokht’s web coverage of the election, from women registering as presidential candidates to interviews with candidates’ advisors and to women’s participation in post-election demonstrations. Emphasizing the campaign’s unprecedented openness and use of technology, Esfandiari discusses how candidates catered to Iran’s tech-savvy youth by posting campaign information on blogs, Facebook, and YouTube. Despite the difficulty of reporting after the election dispute, she stresses how IranDokht,

in particular, was able to provide up-to-date information on the protest movement to the international community and mobilize global support for the demonstrators.

In “The June Elections and the Change in Political Culture,” Jaleh Lackner-Gohari emphasizes the uniqueness of the current Iranian women’s movement and its unprecedented role in the June 2009 election. She details the progression of Iranian women’s role in politics from their impact in the 1997 election of President Khatami to their formation of the One Million Signatures Campaign and to the “Coalition of Women” that consolidated women’s groups of various perspectives before the 2009 election. According to Lackner-Gohari, the current movement’s self-empowering approach and inclusive method have effectively communicated their goals, transforming the Iranian political climate before and after the election. Such a “horizontal

model of exchange and dialogue” highlights the success of the Iranian women’s movement in mobilizing female political activists from across the political spectrum around a cohesive message of change.

The featured papers, based on the speakers’ presentations, demonstrate the changing role of women and the women’s movement in Iran. Whether focusing on Internet-savvy young women getting political updates from candidates’ Facebook pages before the election or determined older women demonstrating on the front lines after the election, these papers highlight the prominence of women throughout the election. Although the authors emphasize different aspects of women’s participation in the June 2009 election, they rightly acknowledge the unprecedented nature of the elections, the active participation of women, and the indefinite implications for Iran.



Iran’s Presidential Elections: Women’s Role in the Pre- and Post-Election Politics


Nayereh Tohidi, *Chair and Professor, Gender and Women’s Studies Department, California State University, Northridge*

Iranian women figured prominently in the tenth presidential elections of June 2009, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner by a wide margin. In large pre-election rallies and intense campaigns, and during the post-election upheaval, women played a visible and active role. Several internal conflicts within the ruling elites, including long-existing cracks within the ranks of the Shi’ite clerics and also between the people and the state, came to the fore during and after the presidential elections. Women in large numbers joined the massive street protests that followed the vote, as opposition candidates and their supporters raised accusations of wholesale fraud in the official results and declared it an “electoral coup.”

The international media, often unaware of the brewing women’s movement in Iran, were surprised to see women marching in the demonstrations in large numbers and braving the violent response by security forces, which dramatically

illustrated the clash between a changing society and an increasingly repressive government. But the massive participation of women in the latest protests is not an unprecedented, overnight development. This has been the result of many years of rather quiet educational and organizational work carried out by many small groups of women and men focused on civil rights, especially women’s rights. Women’s social activism and participation in political movements in modern Iran has more than 100 years of recorded history, with special highlights during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911, the nationalist movement of the 1950s, the modernization and reform processes of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79.¹

What is unprecedented is not the massive quantity but a new quality of women’s participation, which is marked by a high level of gender consciousness, self-confidence, and feminist agen-



cy. During the 1979 Revolution, too, thousands of women, mostly covered in black veils, rallied behind Ayatollah Khomeini under a populist Islamist discourse envisioning a utopian and just Islamic society. But the current social uprising is neither revolutionary nor sectarian. It is a nonviolent and non-ideological, pro-democracy movement in which demands for individual freedom and civil rights, including women's rights, constitute its primary components.

Women from all walks of life, but mostly young and urban middle-class women, took part in both the electoral campaigns and in the protests against the results, which were widely viewed as fraudulent. While some among these female participants were devout women covered in the traditional black chadors, many others appeared in colorful scarves, modern fashions, and secular looks. Unlike the demonstrations orchestrated by the government that we were used to seeing over the past 30 years, these rather spontaneous protests have not been sex-segregated. Women marched not behind men, but alongside men or even in the forefront.

The nightly cries of “*Allah-o-Akbar*” (God is great) and “Death to the Dictator” on the rooftops are similar to those during the 1978–79 Revolution. Unlike then, however, the current movement is not dominated by sectarian and revolutionary Islamism. Nor is the revolutionary Marxism-Leninism of the guerrilla movements of the 1970s present in the current movement. While a populist, religious, fundamentalist (Islamist), and anti-imperialist discourse led by Ayatollah Khomeini was predominant in Iran in the 1970s, today a pluralist and predominantly secular discourse based on human and women's rights, civil rights, and the democratic rule of law makes up the main framework of the current movement. By secular, I do not mean anti-religion or even irreligious, but, rather, an adherence to the separation of state and religion. This growing secular tendency in Iran rejects theocracy, the supremacy of the clerical power in politics, and the absolute rule of the jurist (*velayat-e motlaqeh faqih*) and aspires to create a secular republic based on free elections and parliamentary democracy. In other words, the dominant mindset in the current movement is post-Islamist and non-ideological.

Several interrelated, and at times paradoxical, factors have contributed to this evolutionary process. Among recent changes at the local and national levels in Iran are the demographic changes such as increased urbanization and the youth bulge in Iran's rising population; the dramatic increase in literacy and educational attainment, especially among women, who now make up 63 percent of university enrollment; the remarkable decline in fertility rates thanks to a successful campaign for birth control and family planning along with an improvement in primary health care; the rise in women's socio-political participation; and the increase in women's contribution to economic, scientific, and cultural production in the arts, literature, and cinema.

The interplay of these internal changes with certain developments at the international level, especially the impact of globalizing factors such as the new communication technology (including the Internet, mobile phones, and satellite TV) and the global currency of human rights discourse and feminism promoted by the United Nations and by supportive devices such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)² that are being ratified by an increasing number of UN member states, have all contributed to the transformations manifested in the current movement for democracy in Iran.

The socializing and politicizing impacts of the 1979 Revolution on women, especially on the traditional and conservative segments, helped expand the size and influence of middle-class women in Iranian society. Initially formed during the years of modernization under the Pahlavi dynasty from the 1920s to the 1970s, the modern middle-class and urban women of Iran made up the core of the women's groups who resisted the discriminatory policies and laws enacted under the Islamist government since 1979.

They were later joined by an increasing number of Islamic women activists and devout Muslim women members of the traditionalist and conservative strata who gradually became disillusioned with the Islamist utopia and moved toward a reformist reconstruction of the polity and a feminist reinterpretation of their faith. This was due to their encounter with patriarchal injustices

such as polygamy, temporary marriages, and male privileges in divorce, child custody, and inheritance, along with many other discriminatory laws and policies reinforced by the Islamic Republic. The increasing socioeconomic or class disparity, corruption, and particularly the government repression of individual freedoms and civil rights, turned many female and male members of the younger generations away from the Islamist state.

Therefore, the youth, especially the student movement and the women's movement, now make up the main forces of the current civil rights effort and constitute the primary agents of change and democratization in Iran.

Women's Role in the Election Process


Elections in Iran are neither free nor fair. People are allowed to choose among a few candidates who have passed the screening process and been vetted by an unelected body called the Guardian Council.³ It was only a few months before the June 12 elections that the overall mood shifted from political apathy and hopelessness to a sense of hope for change, which resulted in a vast mobilization to participate in voting. This was mainly due to the progressive platforms for change presented by the two reformist front-runners: Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. What distinguished the reform candidates from the incumbent, President Ahmadinejad, were their promises to stop the latter's onslaught on civil rights, to improve the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities, to mend the mismanaged economy (marked by 25 percent inflation and rising unemployment), and to change the hostile and confrontational foreign policy and militarization that have resulted in the UN resolutions against Iran, economic sanctions, and the threat of Western military attacks and war, all of which have created an overall sense of national insecurity and isolation.

Among women activists, too, it took a while to overcome the widespread hesitance to engage in the electoral process, especially by those who had lost all hope for political reform and trust in any of the candidates. About three months before election day, however, an increasing number of feminists and women's groups decided to take advantage of the rela-

tive openness of the political atmosphere during election times in order to render an active feminist intervention into the process. They formed a diverse coalition called Convergence of Women (*Hamgarayee Zanān*) that represented 42 women's groups and 700 individual activists. The coalition pressed the presidential candidates on two specific sets of women's demands: ratification of CEDAW and revision of four Articles (19, 20, 21, and 115) in the constitution that enshrine gender-based discrimination.⁴ Though as individuals, many feminists did take sides and voted for one of the two reform candidates, the coalition remained a demand-centered (*motalebeh-mehvar*) campaign only and avoided endorsement of any particular candidate. Rather, it put each candidate on the spot to address women's issues and respond to the demands specified by the coalition.

The coalition tried to bring women's issues to the surface through their publications and appearances in the media, on the campaign trails and at street rallies, press conferences, and interviews with the candidates. They effectively utilized new communication technology (SMS via cell phones, e-mails, and the Internet) to network and mobilize activists. Meanwhile, a film made by a prominent feminist director, Rakhshan Banietemad, put all of these efforts together in a documentary accessible on the Internet. The film included revealing interviews on women's issues with some prominent artists and the presidential candidates while they were sitting alongside their wives. Except for Ahmadinejad, the three other presidential candidates agreed to participate.

It should be noted that prior to the 2009 electoral campaigns, a new wave of women's collective activism had already brought women's demands for equal rights into the political scene. Following a growing trend in activities of women's press and women NGOs since 1998 and some street demonstrations in 2004 and 2005, a number of organized and focused collective campaigns took shape in 2006. The largest, most grassroots and influential one has been the One Million Signatures Campaign to change discriminatory laws.⁵ Other campaigns and coalitions included: the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign; the Women for Equal Citizenship



Campaign; the Women's Access to Public Stadiums Campaign; the National Women's Charter Campaign; and Mothers for Peace.⁶ Despite the peaceful and transparent nature of the Iranian women's movement, many women's activists have faced state repression such as smear campaigns by the state-run media, beatings, and arrests by security forces. In the five years prior to the presidential elections, over 70 women activists were arrested, taken to Evin Prison and charged with "disruption of public opinion," "propagating against the state," and "endangering of national security." While most detainees were released on bail within a few weeks, some have been sentenced to several months or even several years of imprisonment.⁷

All of these efforts contributed to the visible changes in the gender politics of the tenth presidential election in 2009, which distinguished it from previous races. For one, all of the three candidates running against Ahmadinejad promised to address women's demands raised by the coalition and to also include female ministers in their cabinets should they get elected. The front-runner candidate, Mousavi, was usually accompanied by his wife, Zahra Rahnavaard, with whom he held hands—a bold and unprecedented act in the Iranian sex-segregated political culture. Rahnavaard, a prominent Muslim woman activist, accomplished writer, academic, and artist is the first woman to become a university president in Iran. Her stature, strong personality, outspokenness about human and women's rights, and colorful headscarf were among the traits that added to the appeal of this couple as a promising choice for change.

The other reform candidate, Karroubi, also conducted a much more woman-friendly campaign than the one he ran in 2005 during the previous elections. Though a clergyman, his campaign team—composed of some respected reformers—included a prominent woman activist, Jamileh Kadivar, as the spokesperson of his campaign headquarters. His wife, a strong professional woman, was also actively involved in the management of his campaign. Even the conservative candidate, Mohsen Rezai, was seen accompanied by his wife in several campaign meetings. Finally, Ahmadinejad himself felt com-

pelled to bring along his wife during one of the campaign events.

In short, both in symbolism and content, the tenth presidential elections signified considerable progress in gender politics in Iran. This progress has been mainly due to years of slow but persistent efforts by women toward consciousness-raising and feminist interventions in cultural and political arenas. As briefly mentioned above, in recent years, the women's rights movement in Iran has been manifested in feminist press (print journals as well as online web logs and websites); arts, literature, and movies; organized and focused collective campaigns through networking; and other activities in various NGOs.

Women's Role in the Post-Election Uprising

As discussed earlier, women's presence in the post-election Green Movement has been as prominent as the one in the election process. The prevalence of artistic images, songs, and poetry, especially the choice of the color green as the unifying symbol, gave the reform camp a sort of "feminine" tone. This rather spiritual, artistic, and peaceful mood that predominated because of the presence of many young people, especially young women, continued during the first days of protests in the aftermath of the election.

In the vote's aftermath, millions of marchers flashed victory signs (instead of clenched fists) and carried green-colored banners with the slogan: "Where is My Vote?" This simple yet profound slogan signifies a prevalent keenness on civil and political rights. The color green signifies symbolism rooted in both the national Islamic and the secular, pre-Islamic mythology and poetry of Iran, but also the global color of peace, non-violence, and environmental protection.

Despite increasingly violent suppression, over 3,000 arrests, and around 60 deaths (according to official figures), the activists who are engaged in the Green Movement so far have remained, for the most part, non-violent. Women's roles as political actors, journalists, lawyers, and activist demonstrators are clearly evident in the increasing number of women who are beaten, injured, killed, or arrested as political prisoners since the June 12 upheavals.⁸

Even the first icon of the current civil rights movement is a woman: Neda Agha-Soltan, who was gunned down by the government-controlled militia while peacefully demonstrating. Her death was captured by a cell phone camera for all the world's eyes to see, and it turned her into a martyr, which inspired more demonstrations and the outrage that followed.

Neda's characteristics are representative of some of the demographic, gender, and class orientations of the current civil rights movement in Iran. Her young age (27 years old) reminds us of the 70 percent of Iran's population below age 30 who are faced with increasing rates of unemployment, socio-political repression, and humiliation should Ahmadinejad's repressive and militaristic policies continue for another four years. Neda's Azeri ethnic background reminds us of Iran's ethnic diversity and the ongoing tension between the center and peripheries over socioeconomic disparity, discrimination, and uneven distribution of power and resources. Neda's choice of fields of study, theology and philosophy, was based on her quest to find answers to the questions of her time. But, as described by her mother, she became disappointed with the increasingly repressive atmosphere of the universities and turned to private training in music. Her music teacher was actually with her on the day of the protest (June 20, 2009) and was at her side when she was shot.⁹ Neda belonged to no political party or ideological group. Her quest was basically for freedom and a democratic society that would respect her human rights and dignity as a woman.

Another icon of this movement, a 19 year-old male student, Sohrab Árabi, was reportedly killed while in the custody of the security forces. He became a rallying point mainly due to his mother daring to speak out about her ordeal. Parvin Fahimi, who finally recovered the body of her son after three weeks of searching from one prison to another, has become a leading advocate for families of political prisoners and mothers of martyred activists who have formed a new women's group called Mothers in Mourning (*Madaran-e Azadar*).¹⁰ To commemorate their lost children and also demand the release of the arrested ones, mothers of martyrs and political prisoners hold weekly rallies in

designated public parks in Tehran. Following a call by Shirin Ebadi, a leading human rights lawyer and 2003 Nobel Laureate for Peace, Iranian mothers in other parts of Iran and the world have begun holding similar rallies on a weekly basis as a show of global solidarity with women in Iran.

A Post-Islamist Paradigm Shift in Iran's Political Culture

The Green Movement is a home-grown product of a long quest for reform, democracy, and rule of law in Iran. Ironically, it emerged from within the former revolutionary Islamists disillusioned with totalitarian Islamism and was welcomed by many secular dissident groups who have suffered from years of repression and marginalization under the Islamist regime. This cracking from within is, in part, due to the internal contradictions embedded in the institutional hybrid called the "Islamic Republic." In the face of a growing movement for democracy and secular rule of law, the tense coexistence of its theocratic, unelected component (Islamic) with the elected, popular authority (Republic) now seems untenable.

In the aftermath of what many called the "electoral coup," state power is taken over by the increasingly powerful hard-line military (the Revolutionary Guard) and its conservative clerical allies. This alliance seems determined to erode the republican part of the Islamic Republic hybrid regime and further consolidate its theocratic and unelected component as the real power. But new cracks along with the long-existing ones within the ranks of the Shi'ite clerics seem to be deepening and multiplying. The post-election wave of repression, the violent crackdown on peaceful and legal demonstrations, torture, show trials and lies, and the revelation of cases of rape and sexual abuse of the political prisoners have expanded people's distrust of and resentment toward the government and resulted in a legitimacy crisis for the regime.

Iran's situation, then, is still fluid as new developments unfold. The prospect, especially in the medium and long terms, seems to be promising and hopeful. The growing quest for democracy is finally becoming intertwined

with women's rights. This is indicative of a paradigm shift in Iran's political culture and intellectual discourse. In the background of the latest changes in gender politics in Iran, even Ahmadinejad, regardless of how long his second term may last, has to show some positive changes in his gender policies. In an attempt to mend his badly damaged image among his own populist base and prevent further loss of support, Ahmadinejad may feel compelled to appease the female members of his constituency by a few women-friendly gestures.

At the same time, ordinary women, young and old, as well as feminist activists, continue to take part in protests and civil disobedience in different parts of Tehran and other major cities. Advocates of women's rights and civil and human rights are faced now with an increasingly brutal suppression by the growingly unpopular and illegitimate government that is backed by a military-clerical alliance. The main subject of discussion among the Iranian women activists at present is how to integrate women's demands with the broader quest for reform and democracy in the face of increasing repression. They are seeking ways to continue rendering a feminist intervention in the current democracy movement in order to assure that its direction is toward a nonviolent, nonsectarian, pluralistic, and egalitarian future. This is a daunting struggle, yet also an exciting and inspiring process, from which global feminism and especially women activists in Muslim majority countries can learn many new lessons.

Notes

1 For studies on the history of the women's movement in Iran, see for instance: Eliz Sanasarian. *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Parvin Paidar. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nikki Keddie. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); and Janet Afary. *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

2 CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Currently, 185 countries - over ninety percent of the members of the United Nations - are party to the Convention. During the reform oriented presidency of Mohamad Khatami (1997-2005), CEDAW was passed in parliament in 2003, albeit with several reservations. But the Guardian Council blocked its ratification and the final decision was left upon another body, the Expediency Council. The latter has kept it shelved since then and the hardliners in power have not even tried to reconsider this convention.

3 The Guardian Council is composed of six clerics appointed by the unelected supreme leader and six jurists selected by the head of the judiciary for approval by the Majlis. This powerful body vets legislation, political candidates and election results.

4 For information on this coalition see: <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article2461>

5 Visit their Web sites at:
<http://www.sign4change.info/english/spip.php?article18>
<http://zanschool.net/english/spip.php?rubrique3>
<http://zanschool.net/campaign/>

6 For more information and documentation on these campaigns, see Nayereh Tohidi "The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran: A Global Perspective," in *Women's Movements in a Global Era* edited by Amrita Basu, Westview Press, forthcoming, and also Rochelle Terman, "The Contemporary Iranian Women's Rights Movement," *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, (forthcoming).

7 See, for example:
<http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?rubrique5>
<http://www.meydaan.com/english/default.aspx>

8 On arrested women activists and the conditions of women prisoners, see the following report by Shadi Sadr, a prominent feminist lawyer written after her own release from Evin prison: <http://www.meydaan.com/Showarticle.aspx?arid=883>

For more information on imprisoned women journalists and other activists, see: [http://wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-565012](http://wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-565012)

9 See the witness report at:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8119713.stm>

10 Visit their Web site at:
<http://www.mournfulmothers.blogfa.com/>



Quiet Leadership and Pressure from Below: Women's Participation in Iranian Public Life

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The Present Crisis


Women have been politically active throughout modern Iranian history. Women were present during the street protests against the Shah in the 1979 Revolution. This is one reason Ayatollah Khomeini himself defended women's voting rights in the new Islamic Republic, when some conservative clergy wanted to rescind women's suffrage, and even though Khomeini had opposed women being given the right to vote under the Shah. But he said that now women had earned the right to vote through their participation in the politics of the Revolution, and no one had the right to try to take it away from them. His intervention ended any real question of a return to all male suffrage and has become the recurrent model of male political leaders' reluctance to recognize Iranian women's demands until they are pushed to do so by the activism of their own female constituents.

Women's presence as a social group became politically significant in 1997 during the first election of President Khatami. During that election, which saw a participation rate of nearly 80 percent and with Khatami receiving nearly 70 percent of the votes, a distinct "gender gap" appeared in the voting results. In that election, and in the elections since then, women have consistently been strong supporters of reformist candidates and policies. In the most recent presidential election, women's formal involvement in the process was evident both in Zahra Rahnavard's unprecedented public campaigning for her husband, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and in the transparent influence women's groups had on the political platforms of both Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the two reformist candidates. Since the announcement of the official results, women have been fully involved and visible in street protests and public actions against a government that is no longer perceived as legitimate.

For observers of the present situation in Iran, especially those in the United States where media coverage and scholarship on Iran since the Revolution has been severely limited, this very public presence of women has been a surprise. For those of us who have been able to travel back and forth to Iran and interact with individuals and civil society groups during the past ten years, it is not surprising. Despite the very serious limitations on Iranian women's legal equality (especially regarding their testimony in court and their rights under the family laws regarding marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance), women's social progress has been impressive. Iranian women may be second-class citizens, but they are active citizens; women vote, drive, work, go to school, are present in the streets and in the Parliament, and are fully active members of civil society. They claim those rights to which they are legally entitled, and they continue to struggle to increase the scope of their rights. Particularly since the reformist period of 1997 to 2005, recent Iranian history has been a continuous experience of immediate short-term crises and long-term optimism. Women's social progress and their ongoing engagement with public culture are the main foundations for that belief in positive future development.

Women's Social and Material Condition

If women's participation in this current movement is different from their participation in the 1979 Revolution and before, it is because Iranian society is different, and most of these differences are actually the product of the policies of the Islamic Republic. This difference has suddenly become very visible to the West, even though it has been obvious in Iran for quite some time. Despite the very paternalistic and patriarchal rhetoric of the state, its social policies have changed women's material condi-



tions, enabling them to be active participants in national life.

Since the early years of the Islamic Republic, the state has been pressured by its own female constituents to ameliorate glaring gender injustices (this is not necessarily quite the same as gender inequalities). Because of consistent, active pressure from elites and ordinary women (who, for instance, were incorporated into the very successful rural health workers volunteer program¹), the material conditions of the majority of women and girls have improved even though their legal position remains explicitly unequal. Secular-affiliated feminists have pressed for women's rights (perhaps most notably in the mass protests against imposition of mandatory *hijab* after the Revolution and in the more recent One Million Signatures Campaign to reform the Constitution), although like other secular activists in Iran, they have not been particularly successful.

But "Islamist" feminists, or now more appropriately termed "reformist" feminists in the Iranian context, were already active participants in the project of the new state so it was harder to justify excluding their demands and influence. They successfully pushed for practical policy remedies to ordinary women's heartfelt concerns including war-widows' loss of their children's custody to male relatives during the Iran-Iraq war, the institutionalization of a wages-for-housework estimate to be included in divorce settlements to protect wives from frivolous husband-initiated divorces, and formal administrative barriers to the registration of marriages before age 18 as a way to encourage families not to marry their daughters off at the legal age of nine. Women's issues also were included within the scope of public health and children's concerns, which were often less controversial.

Despite Iranian women's legal inequality, the key indicators of their social well-being (women's literacy, women's literacy compared to men's, fertility, age of marriage, public presence) have improved tremendously since the Revolution and are actually quite good according to recent statistics.² Iran has become a modern, integrated society, and this has happened under the Islamic

Republic. Some reference to key statistical indicators is illuminating.

Literacy

In 1980, the literacy rate in Iran was only 49 percent of the population, and while 60 percent of men were literate, only 38 percent of women were. So not only were a minority of Iranians able to read and write, but a significant gender gap existed in literacy rates between men and women (as well as between school attendance rates among boys and girls). Since the Revolution, literacy rates have risen considerably, driven in part by mandatory, free public education for both boys and girls and the sex-segregation of elementary and secondary schools (which removed the objections of conservative religious families against sending their daughters to be educated in a "corrupting" environment; the same danger is not perceived in an all-girls school staffed by women). By 2000, the national literacy rate was 75 percent, including 83 percent of men and nearly 70 percent of women; not only have the basic rates increased, but the literacy gender gap has also decreased. In the key demographic cohort of young people aged 15-24, literacy rates in 2000 were 94 percent overall, including 96 percent for men and 91 percent for women.³ In the past nine years, the rates have increased even more, and now the literacy gender gap for young people has essentially disappeared (to such an extent that President Ahmadinejad has proposed quotas for women's entrance to university, where women are now in the majority).

Fertility

A similar story emerges in the population growth rate. In the 1950s and 1960s, Iran had a typically high population growth rate of 3.1 percent. That started to come down during the 1970s, but in 1977 it was still 2.7 percent. After the Revolution, pro-natalist policies and other factors (the closing of universities and disruption of the job market) meant that lots of women had babies. By 1987, the population growth rates shot up to 3.9 percent, one of the highest in the world. Given the government's commitment to policies

like free, mandatory childhood education and basic healthcare, this was a problem. Consultation among numerous stakeholders including women's groups, public health and medical practitioners, policy makers, and the clergy resulted in a remarkable change in family planning policy that included available contraception and mandatory sex education classes for engaged couples, all of which were religiously endorsed. By 1997, the population growth rate was 1.5 percent, equivalent to the most developed countries.⁴ So, in ten years, the population growth rate in Iran went from one of the highest in the world to among the lowest, a public policy success that has not been matched by any other country (and was achieved without overt state repression like the one-child policy in China).

Mean Age of Marriage

Although the legal age of marriage for "women" is nine years old, the mean age at first marriage for women is in the mid-twenties. While the mean age at first marriage for men has remained almost the same for thirty years (it was 25 in 1967 and 25 in 1997, although it dropped slightly in the intervening years), the mean age at first marriage for women was 18 in 1967 and has been climbing slowly but steadily ever since. Among other things, this change signifies that the age difference between married couples has been reduced, increasing the likelihood of "partner marriage" rather than a more traditionalist model of the husband as *pater familias*. The discrepancy of age at first marriage between urban and rural women has also almost disappeared, a reflection of the increased integration of social conditions and basic norms for the entire national population.⁵


In the thirty years since the Revolution, Iranian women as a group have become more educated, marry later, and have fewer children. Differences in life opportunities and expectations between urban and rural women have decreased. Statistically, women's educational and health indicators are nearly equivalent to men's. They work, drive, vote, are elected to local and national government office, and are present in public space and public life. So, their visible presence in the recent political demonstrations and public pro-

tests is consistent with their active participation in Iranian social life.

The Campaign

Two things were distinctive about women's participation in this last election. For the first time in Iran, both secular and reformist women's groups collaboratively produced a joint political platform and presented it to the candidates for their response. Within the context of Iranian politics, this was an extraordinary achievement. One of the biggest political taboos has been against secular and religious activists working together, even when their interests are quite similar. For instance, both secular and Islamist feminist groups have been working for many of the same goals for years: improved legal rights for women, especially regarding marriage, divorce, and child custody; improved opportunities for education and work; more respect for women in both private and public life. Secular feminists tended to work for these goals under the motto of "gender equality," while religious feminists tended to use the motto of "gender justice," a seemingly minor difference in semantics that symbolized larger differences of political alignment, strategy, and personal affiliation.

But in the months leading up to the June election, and after experiencing the harsh repressive policies and attitudes of the Ahmadinejad administration, the women's and feminist groups realized they had to overcome their problems and work together to achieve their goals. Thirty-four Islamist (reformist) and secular feminist groups came together to form the Convergence of Women. Not only was this the first time women's groups had been able to mobilize together in this way, but it provided a unique example of collective secular-reformist mobilization within the Iranian social and political landscape. The Convergence put together a common platform, and they interviewed representatives of the opposition candidates to determine which candidate would be most consistently committed to women's rights.⁶ In the end, the Convergence approved both Karroubi and Mousavi as acceptable candidates, but stated that Mousavi's campaign plan was better and more comprehensive.



Mousavi himself stated that the interaction with the Convergence had made him realize that he needed to incorporate women's concerns more fully into his campaign platform; they pushed him to define his leadership on women's issues more explicitly.

The second unprecedented change in women's participation in the campaign was Zahra Rahnavard's very public presence. She was not just a campaign wife; she is a very well-known and respected public figure in her own right (the joke used to be that Mousavi was referred to as "the husband of Zahra Rahnavard"). But having her appear publicly campaigning with and for her husband was a first in Iran and emphasized that this was unashamedly a "two-career" couple. As the former chancellor of Al-Zahra University, the only women's university in Iran (there are some women's seminaries in Qom but no other women's universities or colleges), Rahnavard was quietly associated with the Islamic feminist movement in Iran and with feminist reforms sponsored by Islamist feminist working groups during the reformist parliaments of Khatami's presidency. Her presence gave tangible support to Mousavi's claim that he would pay attention to women's concerns and issues.

The Aftermath

When the official election results were announced, with suspicious speed and incredible numbers, Iranians responded with the largest street mobilizations seen since the Revolution.⁷ The official results, the manner in which they were announced, and the government's heavy-handed response to its critics have resulted in the de-legitimization not only of the election process itself, but also in the leadership authority of the current regime, both elected (Ahmadinejad) and unelected (Ayatollah Khamenei). Iranian elections may have been limited in scope (in terms of the power of the vetting process and the leverage of the state-run media), but they were perceived as real arenas for competition within a limited range. Now, that presumption has been called into question and, with it, the expectations of the population for political participation. Ironically, in attempting to close off possibilities for political engagement, the

regime seems to have opened up new spheres for popular action.

Ordinary people have re-appropriated the resistant practices of the Revolution, which had been symbolically co-opted by the hard-line factions of the regime. Women have been involved in all aspects of this renewed public presence: in the street marches, where their presence (including the presence of older and more traditional women) helped ensure a less violent atmosphere; in the evening rooftop shouting of the Revolutionary-era slogan "*Allah-o Akbar*," in which women were often the ones to prod their other family members to use the private roof space of their own homes for political purposes; and in the informal actions ranging from writing street graffiti (the green V), to writing blogs, to engaging personally with individual members of the police and Revolutionary Guards (a form of quiet personal diplomacy that may actually be more effective in societies like Iran's where women are active public citizens while still being regarded as gendered subjects in need of social protection). Despite the immediate repression of much of the campaign organization of the reformist candidates, the mass arrests and mass trials displayed the absolute dominance of the ruling faction of the government; it is completely clear to the general population that the previous conventions of legitimacy and authority are no longer valid.

Across the ideological spectrum, the Iranian women's movement is now even more closely identified with the reformist political movement, precisely because Mousavi (and to some extent Karroubi) openly backed activist women's concerns. Even women *Basiji* (members of the volunteer militia that is the enforcement arm of social control for the regime hardliners), who one would presume to be among the strongest supporters of Ahmadinejad, expressed disagreement before the election with the president's policies regarding family and marriage law and other gender issues.⁸ It was not at all clear that these supposedly bedrock factions of conservative support were going to vote for Ahmadinejad, and the violent repression of the post-election marches shocked the nation. But the success of the Convergence in uniting secular feminist and

reformist women's groups into an effective lobbying platform has been a double-edged sword, at least in the short-term. Along with other targeted groups (reformist political leaders, influential press editors and journalists, researchers, students, private-sector entrepreneurs), women have been arrested and pressured. Arrests have included both high-profile activists and more anonymous young people, whose situation in prison may actually be worse (there are widespread accusations of systematic rape of young people—both women and men—in the political detention centers).⁹

The situation in Iran is in flux; the regime is now at odds with itself, and the crisis of authority will not be resolved by show-trial confessions or Ahmadinejad's attempts to appoint a few ultra-conservative women to his Cabinet. These rhetorical flourishes are now irrelevant. The split in Iran now is not between the religious and the secular, or the conservative and the reformist, or the rich and the poor. It is between those who believe in the rule of law and those who believe in their right (whether divine or arbitrary) to hold power. This split exists within all factions of the population, including among women, the clergy, and the working class. An ever-smaller fraction of the elite and their supporters are trying to maintain power against everyone else, an untenable solution in a post-revolutionary state with a long history of pressure from below.

Notes

1 See Homa Hoodfar, "Activism under the Radar: Volunteer Women Health Workers in Iran," *Middle East Report* 250, Spring 2009, 56-60.

2 See Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today," *Middle East Report* 241, Winter 2006, 22-28, for a fuller discussion of these social indicators.

3 Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 23.

4 Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 23.

5 In 1967, the mean age of marriage at first marriage for urban women was 19, for rural women it was 17; by 1997 the mean age for both urban and rural women was 22. See Moruzzi and Sadeghi, 25.

6 See the English language feminist website *Meydaan* and their online archives for good coverage of the cooperation among groups and the development of the Convergence joint platform before the election.

7 See Ali Ansari, ed., Daniel Berman and Thomas Rintoul, researchers, "Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election" Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St. Andrews, June 21, 2009.

8 See Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic's 'Culture of Modesty'," *Middle East Report* 251, Spring 2009.

9 *Meydaan* provided very good coverage of the arrest off the street of one of the most prominent feminist activists, Shadi Sadr, who was literally pulled away from her friends and shoved into a car by a coordinated effort among several cars of plainclothes police (i.e. not the regular police but members of one a number of shadowy intelligence/security/enforcement groups). She has been released on bail, but is awaiting trial.

Karroubi sent a letter dated July 29, 2009 to Rafsanjani, demanding an inquiry into the rape allegations. Various officials have responded that no sexual abuse took place in prisons supervised by the Judiciary, leaving open the question of actions in the irregular centers (like the now closed Kahrizak) that are not official.

Women in Iran's Green Movement: Their Role in the 2009 Presidential Election Protests

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The Crucial Role of Women in Elections

Women are agents of change in Iran and, as such, they have particular influence in any election through their votes. This phenomenon was seen for the first time during the presidential election of 1997, when Mohammad Khatami attracted women's votes using campaign slogans that promised to respect women and improve their situation in Iran. Following the 1997 election, women acted not merely as voters but also as candidates at the first municipal councils, gaining 16 percent of all seats, a landside considering past results.

During the reform movement from 1997 to 2004, certain restrictions against women were relaxed. However, during the post-reform movement of Ahmadinejad's presidency, women have faced many challenges in the social arena. Every day, Iranian women face disrespectful actions by the moral police. They stop and harass random women on the streets about their hair, makeup, scarves, and other clothing, sometimes arresting them for perceived infractions against Iran's Islamic dress code. Instead of changing discriminatory laws, the Parliament has passed more patriarchal ones, which only serve to further infringe upon women's sense of freedom and equality.

A number of female Members of the 7th & 8th Parliament (MPs) have also spoken out against women's rights. For instance, MP Eshrat Shaegh, referring to female runaways and prostitutes, said "If we execute 10 of these street women, we will no longer face this issue." She added, "Women have no value without their families..."¹ Women's rights activists have also been facing intimidation, detention, and prosecution.

Women's Actions and Demands during the Presidential Campaign

As a result of the hardships women have faced all these years, there is an awareness of their lack

of social, political, and legal rights. This awareness occurred simultaneously with the creation of an atmosphere of gender equality, as women have played an important role in the Green Movement.

Excluding incumbent Ahmadinejad, all the candidates in the 2009 presidential election promised to promote and elevate the status of women in Iran by giving women greater opportunities to be involved in public policy decision-making and by changing discriminatory laws. The reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi made a set of campaign promises, supported by his wife, Zahra Rahnavard. Iranian journalist Kouros Ziabari believes that Rahnavard "created a vigorous enthusiasm and zealotry among the young women in Iran."² Many also believe that Rahnavard has become "a symbol for the women's rights movement."³

Women were energized by the candidates' promises for greater gender equality. During the weeks leading up to the June presidential election, the streets and alleys of Iran's major cities were filled with young women. These women had several motivations for their involvement: "Iranian young women supported reformists, not only to show their hatred of Ahmadinejad's misogynist policies and his government's social restrictions on women's appearance in the public sphere, but also to seek social, economical, political and legal reforms."⁴

Today, the green wave encompasses the whole country. After Mousavi received the news of the fraudulent vote count in favor of Ahmadinejad on the day of the election, he announced his victory and said that any news to the contrary was a lie and a fraud. Just as Mousavi had predicted, Ahmadinejad claimed to be the winner, performing an electoral coup d'état.

Immediately, the security and military forces arrested a number of reformist leaders, includ-

ing many female political activists and journalists. In response, presidential candidates Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi protested, calling on the Iranian people for a continuation of their street protests to demand that the government annul the fraudulent results and hold a new election. Mousavi declared that “protesting to lies and fraud is your right.” He continued, saying, “the ultimate goal of the election fraud is not just to impose an administration that people do not want; it imposes a new political life on the country.”

Iranian Women Take to the Streets as Agents of Resistance

Aside from women’s active role during the election campaign, women have also been on the front lines of protests and resistance. They came out to the streets in great numbers. They fight the police and the *Basij* with stones. They have been killed, detained, arrested, and prosecuted. They have gained a sense of courage and inspire men to continue with their resistance as well. Women protested at first to request an annulment of the election and called for new elections. They announced that Ahmadinejad was not their president and supported Mousavi.

One protestor, Parisa, told CNN, “This regime is against all humanity, more specifically against all women.”⁵ Many men say that since they “are not able to do any thing, maybe these women would be able to bring freedom back to the country.” Iranian women have also proven themselves as agents of courage, inspiring their family and friends to continue protesting. Khadijeh Moqadam, a women’s rights activist, said to RoozOnline, “The fact that women were not passive supporters and they have been in front line to defend their rights, some male protesters chanted that spineless men have not joined us while women have joined the protest movement.”⁶

Women have been protesting since June 12 despite the heavily militarized situation; this is a sign of victory for the Green Movement.

On July 9, 2009, the tenth anniversary of the attack on the Tehran University dormitory, thousands of people held a rally to commemorate the day and to support the Green

Movement. On this day, women played an important role by making a show of resistance in front of the police and by protecting young men from being captured by the police. They chanted, “Here is our land, our city, our sidewalk, and we won’t leave it. You should leave.” Women of all ages resisted – especially old women. Sara Farhang wrote, “While many young women turn out for protests, the presence of older women at these events is also easily observable. One woman in her fifties explained that the main reason she attends protests is to ‘lend support to the younger generation and to try to prevent any violence targeted at them.’”⁷ These women played a leading role and, through their resistance, are keeping the Green Movement alive. Thus, women have been agents of resistance.

Women have developed several initiatives to keep the movement on the streets, including a group called Mothers in Mourning. These women, many of whom lost their children when they were arrested during the protest movement, announced that the group would gather at Laleh Park in Tehran every Saturday and sit together in silence from 7 to 8 PM until they got news of their missing and detained children. The first of these Laleh Park gatherings was promptly subjected to a brutal crackdown by the police and the *Basij*, who beat and arrested the women. Despite this crackdown, at least 500 mothers were able to gather there. They chose Laleh Park because of its proximity to the location where Neda Agha-Soltan was killed. Many of these women have also been outside Evin prison to protest and request the release of their detained family members. In addition, another group of mothers calling themselves Mothers for Peace have been communicating with the human rights unit and citizenship rights center of the judiciary system and the minority of the 8th Parliament to follow up on the situation of the political prisoners who have been detained during the turbulent aftermath of the June 12 election.

Why are Women at the Front Line of the Green Movement

One characteristic of the Green Movement is that women play a crucial role – on the front

line. The main reason for this is that they have faced many restrictions and a general disregard for their social rights. The lawyer, Mehrangiz Kar explained, “Women have learned how to face the government agents that restrict their social rights, such as the dress code condition. Also, they have learned the weak aspects of the regime. So, through social channels, they have gained political experience. This regime restricts social freedom more than anything. Particularly, Ahmadinejad’s government’s radicalism forces more restrictions on women. Therefore, to end such radicalism, women have engaged at the election campaign and post election protest.”

Women have discovered they are not alone in their personal experiences because many women have been disrespected. They were all seeking to change this intolerable situation peacefully, through their votes, so they were excited and actively campaigning. Once, when they saw that their voices were stolen by the government, instead of losing hope and sitting at home, they went out to the streets to demand their votes be counted. When the militia cracked down on protesters, they acted aggressively to release their fellow Iranians from the hands of the paramilitary and the police, fighting back and refusing to be beaten.

Through this new experience, women discovered a sense of courage by acting with a collective spirit. They chanted, “Do not be afraid, do not be afraid, we all are in this together.” Women did not seem to give up. “Iranian women are very powerful, and they want their freedom,”⁸ said one woman in Tehran.

These women are putting their lives on the line to save the little that is left of their republic. The majority has insisted on non-violent resistance, protecting both the riot police and the common people from being killed or beaten.

“The sheer number of females that have either been hurt or killed show that women were in the front line of the recent demonstrations,” says Kianoosh Sanjari, a male Iranian student and blogger who has been arrested, jailed, and tortured merely for protesting against the government.⁹ He added, “The barrier is broken; women now feel empowered not only to throw rocks, but to make an impact on society as a whole.”¹⁰ They

are women from varying social strata: working class, wealthy families, religious, secular, young, and old.¹¹

Iran’s leaders think they can successfully control the country through a government brought to power by a coup d’état. But they have never been more wrong. A young Iranian woman captures this dedicated spirit in a letter cited by Roger Cohen of *the New York Times*:

“I will participate in the demonstrations tomorrow. Maybe they will turn violent. Maybe I will be one of the people who is going to be killed. I’m listening to all my favorite music. I wrote these random sentences for the next generation so that they know we were not just emotional under peer pressure. So they know that we did everything we could to create a better future for them. So they know that our ancestors surrendered to Arabs and Mongols but did not surrender to despotism. This note is dedicated to tomorrow’s children.”¹²

Notes

- 1 <http://www.wfafi.org/E-ZanVol7.htm>
- 2 Iran: “The Barrier is Broken and Women are Throwing Rocks” online at <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7015603210#ixzz0KzuELivF&C>
- 3 <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7015603210#ixzz0KzssuGy&C>
- 4 [http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-564900](http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-564900)
- 5 <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/19/iran.protests.women/>
- 6 <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/news-item/article/2009/july/07//fd5ce2b413.html>
- 7 <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47371>
- 8 <http://www.glass-castle.org/blog/2009/06/women-and-irans-green-movement.html>http://www.philly.com/inquirer/world_us/20090625_Women_move_to_forefront_of_Iran_opposition_movement.html
- 9 <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7015603210#ixzz0KzqPa7Qo&C>
- 10 <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7015603210#ixzz0KzqPa7Qo&C>
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The June Elections and the Change in Political Culture

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At some point during the course of events surrounding the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections, it became clear that something in the political culture of Iran had changed. The culture that emerged at this pivotal point in Iranian history can be understood as the result of strategies developed and refined by the Iranian women's movement.

The methods of political activism developed by Iranian women's activists and used by them during the election season are new in their efficiency and practicability. In order to achieve their goals, Iranian women have worked to develop effective instruments capable of affecting change in an extremely non-favorable political environment.

The strategy of the current Iranian women's movement is unique in its composition and texture, having no similar precedent in recent Iranian history. Its basic structure and method are not based on remote theories or concepts foreign to Iranian society but, instead, have been derived from Iranian women's own longstanding experience of social and legal discrimination, both at the individual and the collective level. Iranian women's unique experiences have made them acutely aware of the underlying problems in Iranian society, and this knowledge equips them with tools necessary to formulate a new approach that recognizes and addresses these problems. The approach is an inclusive one; it does not set out to make a rift between modern advancement and valuable traditional heritage. Instead, it maintains the cultural-religious value systems without depriving Iranian society of progress and modern aspirations.


The lucid development of the Iranian women's movement over the past few years also grew out of the realization that Iranian women needed to take matters into their own hands if they wanted to achieve change. After years of expectations that non-gender-oriented political work would lead to the place they wanted to be, women began to

realize that there was no political or social body other than themselves that was able to address their particular demands. They realized the truth in the statement, "Nobody can scratch my back except the nails of my own fingers."

As the women's movement moved toward self-empowerment, they won important victories and confirmed that this was a powerful new direction for Iranian women. Simultaneously, the national political change inspired hope for change. When Mohammad Khatami ran for president in 1997 on a reform agenda, women contributed significantly and spontaneously to his campaign. In the absence of a political party, the role of Iranian women was critical to Khatami's success.

In 1998, women took their legitimate demands onto the street in a series of demonstrations, including the "7 Tir Square" demonstrations. These rallies were met with violent clamp-downs by Iranian police and were followed by a wave of arrests and imprisonments. Furious about "criminalization" of their peaceful demands, Iranian women saw that this strategy implicated very high costs without delivering the desired results. The leader of the women's movement agreed that it was imperative to adjust the strategy without losing their goals. The new strategies had to be suitable to work under the existing hostile conditions.

Out of this, the idea of the One Million Signatures Campaign was born. The creative matrix to fight the increasing obstacles, and to find ways to maneuver around them, was developed to counter the mounting pressure for women on personal, societal, and, particularly, legal levels. The Campaign hoped to fight legal codes such as "The No-Choice Dress-Code" and a multitude of similar restraining codes pertaining to personal and social conduct that required women, who now represented a new category of aspiring Iranian citizens, to submit to outdated rules and gender restrictions. Although women in Iran had risen to high levels of education,



social participation, and financial independence, the discriminatory legal situation imposed upon women, wives, and mothers created a new puzzle for Iranian women. Once again, the strategy needed to adapt to address these new rising barriers. The prospect of resolving any of these issues within the existing official framework was nearly impossible. Women had to, once more, “scratch their backs” themselves.

It was not difficult for the One Million Signatures Campaign to foresee that their vision would not be tolerated, let alone promoted, by the prevailing rigid concept of the regime. They knew the path they needed to take required new ideas. In order to approach their goals, it was crucial to examine their current resources. They found that empowering resources existed in the daily lives of women, “natural” wells into which they could tap. No official channels or permission were required to convert these resources into dynamic instruments on the move. First, they relied on the power of peers, assuming that if they could mobilize a few women to join the cause, their friends would follow suit and become like-minded allies. Common experience had created an almost non-verbalized system of communication among many of the women activists. It was now possible to share conclusions in a non-excited way, and to see how change, based on maturity and reason, could be brought about. On a different level, the new “human” element of the women’s movement had an important impact, building trust among the “endangered” activists and facilitating fruitful negotiations. Beyond peer groups, families were mobilized to network with each other and generate support for the Iranian women’s movement. This was very helpful, particularly in cases of activist arrests and imprisonments.

Iranian women also developed important rhetoric skills to cope with difficult questions and issues. It was equally important for women activists to be able to successfully communicate their vision of change, and the overall need for it, to people from all social strata of Iranian society. Because the new language was apt to the local experience and need, it spoke to people in a way they could understand. There was no doctrine, but its basis was a sharing of views. Much of what the

activists heard from their clients and contacts was later included in the work-in-progress concept of the vision. The familiar language and the agenda struck a chord with people because it was part of the reality that many of them had experienced. A fruitful dialogue based on grassroots participation evolved while the professional skills and insights of the Campaign activists maintained the profound understanding of legal and societal problems.

Prior to the June 12 presidential election, the Iranian “Coalition of Women” worked to unite women and women’s groups with varied social outlooks to formulate common demands. This consolidation of women’s rights groups was an unprecedented step. They also worked to bridge the gap that had developed between Iranian women and their émigré compatriots. Almost unnoticed, their agenda had become the agenda of Iranian women abroad. In the months leading up to the election, leaders of the women’s movement reached out to all demographic groups, particularly youth, to join together all those aiming to affect change through democratic participation.

The methods perfected by the women’s movement had a transforming effect on the political atmosphere surrounding the June election. In the protests before and after the election, protesters had a female face, Iranian style: they were demanding, yet peaceful; non-confrontational, yet assertive; and decisive perseverance was present at all times. In the aftermath of the disputed election results, the same types of non-traditional methods were useful. “Where is My Vote?” became a new call for civic participation.

Iranian-born women living in the European diaspora followed the progress and pitfalls of women inside Iran. Many diaspora Iranian women actively supported the democratic demands of their peers in Iran. There was a “Where is My Vote?” movement in almost every European country. Media campaigns were initiated to publicly address the phases of events in Iran.¹ In many countries, Iranian women met with members of Parliament and political personalities to inform them about the complicated developments in Iran and to explain how the international community could generate sup-

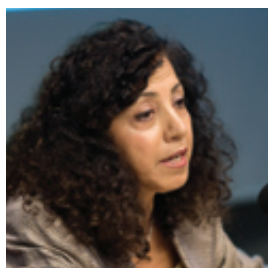
port for human rights and citizenship development in Iran.

Tragic losses of young lives on the streets of Iran, caused by indiscriminate violence and armed aggression against peaceful demonstrators, created sorrow across the world. The “mothers” of those victims set out to commemorate peacefully the tragic incidences in Laleh Park. Their mourning ceremony was broken up, however, and some were arrested. Again, Iranian women living in many European countries set out to hold regular vigils, called Laleh Park Vigils, to mourn the lives lost. Shirin Ebadi and other “Nobel women” proclaimed July 25, 2009 as International Day of Protest to show opposition to the events in Iran. On this day, a green scroll signed by thousands of protesters across the world proclaiming, “He is not my President” was draped across the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

It is important to recognize the role that the Iranian women’s movement played in bringing about a new and mature school of social struggle in Iran today. Their strategy is specially formulated to address the specific problems they aim to fix and makes change possible in the face of a rigid system of arbitrary rule. The women activists in Iran created a horizontal model of exchange and dialogue in a country of top-down fanatical orders and prescriptions. They reconnected Iranians abroad intimately with Iran proper, their home country. The credit for working on a promising democratic concept for a future Iran undoubtedly goes to the wise, flexible, innovative, and caring Iranian women.

Notes

1 <http://united4iran.org/>



Reporting Chaos

Pari Esfandiari, *Founder and President, Eclectic Woman – IranDokht*

During the first week of July 2009, the protest movement in Iran that had started after the June presidential elections continued to unfold in front of the world’s watchful gaze. At the same time, a Hollywood production entitled *The Stoning of Soraya M.* opened on the big screens. The movie depicted Iranian women as voiceless victims of their husbands, their communities, and the authorities, and displayed powerful images of a woman being brutally stoned to death. Meanwhile, TV news reports around the world relayed real-life images from Iran of women as street fighters, chasing and kicking the Revolutionary Guards, and even throwing stones at them.


What are we to make of these contradicting images? Who is the Iranian woman, and where does she fit in the world? What is the nature of her power? Who represents her and how?

Through what kind of media, politics, and culture are we depicting her?

Although these are not necessarily new questions for Iranian women, the recent events in Iran highlight their significance. It was with these questions in mind that I launched IranDokht in 2002, as an online media platform to connect the global community to Iranian women.

At IranDokht, our coverage of the Iranian election began a few months prior to the June 12 poll. As a reporter, one can tell when a story is “hot,” but few anticipated how hot things would get in Iran. In the weeks leading up to the election, there was bombing and unrest, but that was nothing compared to the politically hot debates the candidates were engaged in with each other.

As a non-partisan media outlet, IranDokht resisted pressures to support any one candidate



and covered all of the campaigns to the best of our ability. On June 13, when the world woke up to news of the victory of President Ahmadinejad, the people referred to it as an alleged coup in Iran. IranDokht remained non-partisan, reporting the news as it unfolded. We covered the confusion and then the mass demonstrations that surprised many around the world. During the election campaign, we believed that a substantial number of people had formed a collective identity and effectively reclaimed the public space. Therefore, it was quite predictable that they would not give up easily and would continue questioning the legitimacy of the election results. Demonstrations were initially exciting for people, but then the events turned dangerous. There were beatings, crack-downs, and arrests. At this point, IranDokht's position was clear: we stood by the people as they exercised their right to peaceful demonstration.

To explain how we covered the election, this paper includes six sections: women as political figures, the women's coalition, women as voters and demonstrators, the global community, communications and the internet, and art and popular culture.

Women as Political Leaders

The election saga began with early reports about who was registering to run in the presidential elections. Naturally, this raised questions of whether any women would register and whether the Iranian constitution allows women to seek the country's highest political office. This debate was not new. At IranDokht, we covered the issue of women as presidential candidates, as we did also in the 2005 presidential elections. We believed writing about women could help ignite a chain of events designed to improve women's position in Iran. In 2009, the idea was not to have a female president but to break the taboo. At the same time, our editorials covered the views expressed by the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, key female parliamentarians, and other influential figures regarding the female candidacy and presidency.

Eventually 450 Iranians, including 42 women, registered as prospective candidates for the June presidential elections. We began to ask questions

about who these women were and why they registered knowing they would not be approved. The Guardian Council approves the credentials of the candidates. It was interesting to note that some of the women candidates' outlooks were not quite what the authorities wanted to see. Indeed, since the Islamic Revolution, a large segment of the society – the secular group – has been silenced and made invisible.

On May 17, four male candidates were approved by the Guardian Council to run in the elections. Since each of the four candidates had a wife, we wanted to compare the women's backgrounds and discuss their positions on women's issues. Interviews were arranged with the potential first ladies and other prominent women. Jamileh Kadivar, an opinionated politician in charge of women's affairs for reformist candidate Mehdi Karroubi, talked to IranDokht about the election, its possible outcome, and her possible ministerial position. We talked about the Baha'i religious minority in Iran, and she emphasized their rights as citizens, acknowledging that these rights have been violated in the past. She also expressed some concern about the vote counting procedure. Throughout the interview, Kadivar was clearly alarmed but also hopeful for the future.

Following the disputed election results, women politicians participated in demonstrations. This soon changed, however, because the government proclaimed demonstrations illegal. Faeze Hashemi, former Member of Parliament and daughter of former President Rafsanjani, was arrested briefly when she appeared in demonstrations. She was later released.

The Women's Coalition

The election campaigns and protests brought together a broad coalition of women's organizations with very different objectives and views. Our editorials followed this development to highlight its significance. Particularly interesting was the participation of professional organizations that usually attract those who either choose not to be politically active or are forbidden by authorities to take part in political activities, or both.

Women as Voters and Demonstrators

IranDokht mobilized women to participate in the election by publishing articles about women's role in previous elections and how their involvement had changed the outcome. During the election rallies, Iranian women had a very strong presence. News reports indicated that women who participated in election rallies were not particularly concerned with women's rights but with the election results. In addition, we wrote about the impact any future president's policy could have on women's daily lives.

After the election dispute, reporting became more difficult. Western journalists were arrested or, at the very least, warned to stay in their hotels and not cover the protest movement. Opposition media inside the country were stopped. Some of our sources inside the country were not able to work, forcing us to rely on citizen journalism. We began receiving huge amounts of images, videos, reports, and stories of what was happening inside Iran via e-mails and text messages. On a number of occasions, the government cut off cell phone reception, and the Internet was made slow or inaccessible. Our sources in Iran had to rely on landline phones to tell their stories, and connections with those outside the country became difficult for them. At this point, it was hard to get news from inside Iran on a regular basis so we had to be creative by supplementing information from sources inside Iran with Iran's government-controlled news sources.

We showed the strong presence of women both in election campaigns and the post-election protests. We showed the diversity of ages. We showed modern and traditional women next to each other. We showed women shoulder to shoulder with men in both camps. We showed fearless, young females as they fought, chased, and kicked the security forces. We showed how authorities beat these women as hard as they beat the men. We showed that women were treated as equals. Indeed, in this uprising, Iranian women reclaimed their image.

By June 20, the uprising had its own fallen hero, Neda Agha-Soltan. She was killed on that day while watching the demonstrations from a

street corner. Her death angered people both inside Iran and around the world. Iranian authorities understand the power of the mourning cycle, and exploited this masterfully during Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. So, it was not surprising that the government banned the public from attending Neda's funeral.

The Global Community

For the first time in an Iranian presidential election, the candidates showed interest in voters outside the country. We tried to mobilize our audience outside Iran, pointing out that the election was close and that their vote mattered. Remaining a non-partisan online source, we highlighted the importance of this election from many angles.

After the election, demonstrations inside became increasingly dangerous and violent, support poured in from outside. Iranians all around the world gathered and raised their voices. The most interesting feature of online Internet media is its ability to connect to all parts of the world. So, it was not surprising to see commentary from every corner of the world, including Japan, Sweden, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Washington, and Los Angeles.


There was a great deal of support for the protestors from the international community, starting in Prague where a large crowd gathered in support of Iran's Green Movement. They posted their event on our website, and we received pictures of their gathering and displayed them to our readers.

There was also huge support from human rights activists around the world. There were campaigns to collect signatures in support of demonstrators, to dispute the outcome of the election, and to free those who had been arrested.

Communications and the Internet

Our coverage of the June election indicated from the very beginning that this campaign was different from those of the past. It was unusually open, communications-sensitive, and tech-savvy.

To begin with, we used our website to show the public debates between the candidates.



These debates were very new for Iranian audiences. Ahmadinejad offered his usual controversial style that has served him well in the past. In my interview with Kadivar, she criticized Ahmadinejad's language and especially the unproven corruption charges he made against other politicians. She thought it could set a very low standard and indeed promote a culture of unfounded accusations.

All candidates, knowing their crowds were young and web-savvy, made an effort to use the Internet, including blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube, and other sources. One candidate was especially successful at tapping into this new media. Mousavi's use of the symbolic color green, the image of him holding hands with his wife, Zahra Rahnnavard, and her colorful outfits all demonstrated a mastery of image-building, which were integrated with the campaign's use of technology.

We also covered the nights before the election as people's energy was building. Indeed, it seemed Tehran did not sleep the last two nights leading up to the election. Crowds were in the street all night chanting and dancing. For Iran's young population, this was particularly exciting. And for many others, this freedom was surreal.

It was not surprising to see Iranians using modern communications to their advantage because they are young, educated, and web-savvy. At IranDokht, we received e-mail messages, YouTube links, and reports sent via cell phones, social networks, Yahoo groups, and Twitter. We made sure to select reliable information and present it to the world clutter-free.

Art and Popular Culture

In any country, art and popular culture are very revealing of the public mood. During the election campaigns in Iran, the popular culture was fun, energetic, and vibrant. There were colorful slogans on walls everywhere, and chanting was hopeful and energizing. The green camp's color tapped into people's creative energy and stood out at campaign rallies. Women used green in their outfits, nails, and make-up and adorned their faces and hands with green paint. As soon as authorities began attacking people, however, the mood changed considerably. We received artwork from artists around the world expressing their anger.

Music is another element indicative of the national mood. In the days leading up to the election, candidates used classical national songs. As soon as attacks at demonstrations started, artists around the world expressed their feelings through their music and lyrics. We showcased U2's concert in Spain where Bono sang "Bloody Sunday" as Farsi lyrics were displayed on a green curtain behind him.

Iran is at a very critical point in its history. Indeed, history is unfolding. The protest movement has produced a very vibrant and positive social movement, but it is still young and fragile. There are internal problems in the country that could be manipulated to produce negative outcomes.

In conclusion, the color green has clearly moved beyond Mousavi's campaign. It is now the color of protest, a movement that is grassroots, organic, colorful, fluid, and persistent – all feminine characteristics.



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