

Women in Iran: repression and resistance

By Nasrin Alavi,

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Iranians are the first to know how easy it is for a whole nation to be reduced to the rants of a senseless politician, or for images of a handful of shroud-wearing crazies burning the American flag in Tehran to reach the western media's front-pages. But how easy is it for thousands of Iranian teachers protesting [1] outside the Iranian *majlis* (parliament) - as they did on Saturday 3 March 2007 - to merit any attention?

Not very, is the answer - and especially when the drums of war [2] are being sounded. At such times, it is more convenient to dehumanise the prospective enemy than to see this enemy as it is - composed not of 70 million Mahmoud Ahmadinejad clones but of diligent nurses, factory workers, dear uncles and aunts, poets, writers, filmmakers, students cramming for their exams, lovelorn teenagers, and, yes, protesting teachers.

It is not only teachers who are protesting. On Sunday 4 March, around thirty-three Iranian women (see photos one [3] & two [4]) - as far removed from Ahmadinejad as you can get - were arrested [5] in Tehran. These women had gathered outside Tehran's revolutionary court in solidarity with five of their friends, charged with organising a rally in June 2006 [6] against discriminatory laws against women.

Only two days earlier, they had published an open letter asserting their rights to the freedom of peaceful assembly that are afforded them by the Islamic Republic's constitutional laws:

"International Women's Day [7] is soon upon us as our nation endures a grave period. The internal policies of domination, duress and an ineffectual foreign policy - with an insistence on pursuing a nuclear energy programme - when we have lost the confidence and trust of the world; as the confrontational issues and the continuous warmongering policies of the United State and its allies around the world with the pretext of exporting democracy and human right through sanctions and military attack has presented us with a mounting predicament. On one side - with the absence of a democratic structure - we witness decisions being made on our behalf without our presence or the presence of our legitimate leaders. While at the other end we feel the circle of the siege around us increasingly tighten as we are threatened with sanctions and the nightmare of war....

... we announce our protest against all paternalistic policies, whether they be in the name of dishonest interpretations of Islam or with the pretext of human rights and democracy and we believe what the world community should insist upon debates on democracy and human rights and not nuclear energy, and all within peaceful diplomatic dialogue, not war and destruction....

... Despite all the pressures and obstacles the Iranian women's movement is now within its most enduring and active periods in recent history."

Nasrin Alavi is the author of *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* [8] (Portobello Books, 2005). She spent her formative years in Iran, attended university in Britain and worked in London, and then returned to her birthplace to work for an NGO for a number of years. Today she lives in Britain.

Also by Nasrin Alavi on openDemocracy:

"Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fear [8]" (November 2005)

"Inside Iran [8]"
(February 2006)

"Iran: the elite against the people [8]" (May 2006)

"Tehran's red card to human rights [8]"
(23 June 2006)

"Iran: cracks in the façade [8]"
(11 December 2006)

"Iran's election backlash [8]"
(19 December 2006)

"Iran's attack blowback [8]" (5 February 2007)

On their own terms

Iranian women have come a long way in their struggle for rights. Morgan Shuster lived in Iran at the turn of the century and wrote [9] about his experiences. "The Persian women since 1907 had become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world; that this statement upsets the ideas of centuries makes no difference. It is a fact . . . In Tehran alone, twelve women's associations were involved in different social and political activities. [Iranian women] overnight become teachers, newspaper writers, founders of women's clubs and speakers on political subjects."

The westernised lifestyles that were available to some Iranian women were lost with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. But even the most radical clerics realised that Iran's culture would not stand the strictures imposed in such countries as Saudi Arabia. As Nikki R Keddie [10] has observed [11]: "More than many women in the Islamic world, Iranian women occupy public spaces. Even as wives and mothers, they work, vote, drive, shop and hold professional positions as doctors, lawyers, corporate executives, and deputies in Parliament."

Before the Islamic revolution of 1979 [12], the majority of women chose to cover their heads in public in some way and the requirement that women wear Islamic covering may have helped some of them to gain an education and emancipation, especially in traditional families, as they did not need to go through a drastic cultural makeover to enter the work force. In 1975, women's illiteracy in rural areas was 90% and more than 45% in towns. Now, the nationwide literacy [13] rate for girls aged between 15 and 24 has risen to 97%; while female students in state universities outnumber male ones.

Women have transformed Iran since the revolution. A third of all doctors, 60% of civil servants and 80% of all teachers in Iran are women. Some people believe the regime is immune to change, but many others, especially women, are experts at finding ways round the constraints

of the patriarchal system. These women activists [14] are less interested in whether or not to wear the veil and more concerned with gaining access to education, wider employment opportunities, equality at work and better health care for their families.

Iranian women's advances have not come about overnight; they represent a long history of hard-fought grassroots struggle. Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, one of the women under arrest tonight, writes in the March 2007 issue of the New Internationalist [15] about a day spent going door to door in Tehran in a campaign to get a million signatures [16] in support of women's rights, and about her apprehension of ringing the first doorbell in her old neighbourhood:

"What crime am I about to commit that I feel so scared. Why should I be scared when I'm not doing anything wrong? When my government defends its 'inalienable rights' [to nuclear power], why shouldn't I defend my own inalienable rights?"

... A woman wearing a *chador* comes to the door. The small flowers on her chador are pretty. She looks apprehensive. Her face is puffy and it seems that just like me, she's not had enough sleep last night. I calm down a bit after seeing her face. I am happy to be able to see her face. I think that had it not been for the womanly bravery of Tahereh a century and a half ago that enabled her to discard her *nighab*, I would have had to talk to my fellow citizen without being able to see her face. Even talking to someone 'face to face' would have been meaningless then..."

(The reference is to women's-rights [17] activist Tahereh [Qurrat-al-Ain, 1814-1854], whose removal of her veil provoked a huge uproar).

Also in openDemocracy by and about Iranian women:

Nazila Fathi, "Shirin Ebadi and Iran's women: in the vanguard of change [17]"
(30 October 2003)

Shirin Ebadi, "A single family [17]"
(30 June 2004)

Maryam Maruf, "Offside rules: an interview with Jafar Panahi [17]"
(7 June 2006)

Nayereh Tohidi, "Iran: regionalism, ethnicity and democracy [17]"
(29 June 2006)

Shadi Sadr [18], publisher, lawyer and journalist, and another one of the women under arrest, wrote in 2004:

"Today Iranian women... have imposed themselves on a male-dominated society which still believes women should stay at home. Perhaps nobody sees us, but we exist and we make our mark on the world around us. I assure you that if you look around carefully, everywhere you will see our footsteps."

Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani wrote [19] before her arrest:

"Perhaps we will be imprisoned and become weary with the continuous summons to court. Perhaps we will not be able to continue along our path and educate our female counterparts about the existence of such discriminatory laws. But, what will you do with the countless women who come into contact with the court system - in fact, these very courts are the best educational

facilities for women, through which they quickly learn that in fact they have no rights. Yes, perhaps with your security planning and your modern technology, you may be able to isolate and paralyse the current generation of Iranian women's rights activists, and stop the progression of our campaign, but what will you do with the love that we plant in the hearts of our children? Perhaps with your advanced technology, you will be able to attack the hearts of our personal computers, but what will you do with our dreams?"

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.kosoof.com/archive/354.php#comments>
- [2] <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/briefings/wouldairstrikeswork.htm>
- [3] <http://www.khosoof.com/archive/355.php>
- [4] <http://www.khosoof.com/archive/356.php>
- [5] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6416789.stm
- [6] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/06/13/news/women.php>
- [7] <http://www.internationalwomensday.com/about.asp>
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- [12] http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic_revolution/islamic_revolution.php
- [13] <http://www.unfpa.org/countryfocus/iran/women.htm>
- [14] http://www.adnki.com/index_2Level_English.php?cat=Politics&loid=8.0.392021059&par=0
- [15] <http://www.newint.org/issues/current/>
- [16] <http://en.we4change.com/>
- [17] http://www.cultureofiran.com/women_movements.php
- [18] <http://www.womeniniran.net/archives/ESR/003814.html>
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