

The Iranian women's rights movement and the election crisis

Written by Elham Gheytanchi

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ELHAM GHEYTANCHI, JUN 26 2009

Images of women in chador and rusari (modest Islamic dress) beaten up by security forces in the streets of Tehran and other cities in Iran have dominated the news lately. Neda's image and her brutal death in Tehran on Saturday June 20th in a street protest demanding the annulment of the results of 10th presidential election in Iran has brought women's active role in the post-election crisis into light. At the forefront of these non-violent demonstrations violently suppressed by the government-backed militias (Basij) are brave Iranian women.

The story of the Iranian women's rights movements and their demands go back to the beginning of the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini called on Iranian women to rid themselves of Western influences and become 'truly' liberated by active participation in the Islamic Republic. Iranian women's liberation was only possible, according to Ayatollah Khomeini, if they wear the Islamic hejab which became mandatory in 1980. As a result, the secular women were driven to the margins. By the start of the Iran-Iraq war, it was the martyrs' wives who were the first women demanding their rights from the Islamic state that had promised them Islamic justice. These martyrs' wives wanted the state to grant them custody of their children and not allow their husbands' families to raise their children. The Islamic state had to flex the sharia laws (Islamic family law) in order to meet this challenge.

By the end of the war, women who had taken part in the job market were no longer willing to go back to their homes. Women flooded the universities in unprecedented numbers, demanded more of their share in family matters and forcefully lobbied the authorities to grant them the right to divorce in Islamic family courts that barred women to be judges. Today, 62% of all university attendees are women, rate of divorce initiated by women has accelerated and women's rights have become an issue for the president, the parliament and ultimately the supreme leader who directly controls the judiciary as well as other institutions such as national TV in Iran.

Iranian women's rights activists who have become technologically savvy launched grass-roots movements against the discriminatory laws against women in their country. One Million Signature Campaign is one example of a social movement that started in the mayhem of the previous election. The campaigners focused on gender inequalities in the constitution and through face-to-face interactions raised awareness among women. The campaign quickly spread to 16 provinces and even made the members of the conservative eighth parliament react to their demands. But Ahmadinejad was determined to eradicate demands for gender equality under the banner of national security and alleged that women's rights activists are motivated by the 'enemies of the state.' His government arrested more than 70 activists during the past four years.

But as the arrests continued to rise, so did the number of volunteers in the campaign and other women's rights initiatives. Many more women directly engaged with the authorities to lobby for women's rights. One of these efforts was the broad coalition formed one month before the presidential election to demand all four candidates to respond to women's issues. The coalition specifically demanded two things: that the Iranian state become a signatory in CEDAW (Convention of elimination of discrimination against women) and that changes be made to discriminatory articles in the constitution that lead to gender inequality (articles 19, 20, 21 and 115).

The presidential candidates did respond to women's issues. Zahra Rahnavard, Mir Hussein Mussavi's wife, released

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a public statement stating that Mussavi's cabinet will make Iran a signatory of CEDAW and will work hard to improve women's rights. Jamileh Kadivar, the spokeswoman for Karoubi even went further to question the taboo issue of mandatory hejab.

Whereas Ahmadinejad's government had gone to extreme measures to suppress women's rights activists as agents of the West, the presidential debates raised women's expectations. Ahmadinejad had proposed to make polygamy legal in the country where it is socially unaccepted and to lower the number of female attendees in universities through a gender quota system. The national TV which works under direct control of the supreme leader, who has shown his support for Ahmadinejad before and after the disputed election, made one program after another advocating women's proper place in an Islamic society.

So, it is not un-expected to see waves of women in chadors or rusari (headscarf) on the street to protest a fraudulent election, a coup indeed to re-elect Ahmadinejad. Iranian women know that there is much at stake for them. Four more years of Ahmadinejad will bring more morality police into the streets that harass women and more pressure on Iranian women's rights activists.

Of course, all this said, there should be no doubt that tradition and conservative religious ideas about gender relations are alive in Iran. On Thursday June 25th 2009, a group of women wrote a letter to the Iranian judiciary requesting that Shirin Ebadi be prosecuted for protesting against human's rights violation in Iran since the election. There are also Iranian women who, for no other reason but their religious beliefs, are against women's equality because they see it as a threat to Islamic values. This is precisely why many women's rights activists firmly believe that social change in Iran will be incremental, cultural and for the most part independent of political rifts.

Today, Iranian women are in the streets protesting and throwing themselves at the Basij to protect the lives of the youth, the students and all those who want their voices to be heard through a non-violent movement. The middle-aged women remind the Basij of the Islamic Republic's promise to women; Islamic justice that would be better than any Western ideas including feminism. Today is the day when traditional women take a stand against coercion in the name of Islam by the state. The bloody face of Neda will export the revolutionary promises for Islamic gender equity but in a completely opposite way than what was initially intended by the founders of the Islamic state.

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