

Iran's women movement in transition

Friday 22 October 2010, by [VAKIL Sanam](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2009).

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The headline news of Iran continues to be dominated by hard, often menacing political news - from Tehran's nuclear programme and the international tensions it raises, to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon and the acclamation the president received as he denounced Israel from just across the border.

But behind the headlines, Iran's everyday life - including the way that Iran's citizens cope with the many social and political challenges pressing them - offers an often more revealing insight into the country's true reality.

The battle for gender equality in Iran continues to be one of these. The daily struggles of Iranian women may have receded from international attention since the government's vicious crackdown in the wake of the presidential election of June 2009, but they still provide an essential prism through which to understand the inner life and the dynamics of change in the Islamic Republic.

Women vs the state

Women were prominent participants in the post-election demonstrations, and many activist women were targeted by the regime or caught up in its dragnet during the months of protest. Indeed, scores of women have been detained and jailed since June 2009, and several have received unprecedentedly long jail sentences. An equally damaging measure to women is the return to parliament of a controversial "family-protection" bill whose provisions would (among other things) make polygamy easier.

The overall purpose of the regime's strategy here is to quash the momentum and impact of Iran's women's movement. This very objective indicates that women's rights remain a potent element of the contests - factional, political and ideological - that dominate Iran's domestic frontier.

The fraudulent re-election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad and the rise (before and after the election) of the opposition "green movement" are but a phase in the long-running tensions between state and society in Iran. Since the revolution that led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, women have been at the forefront of these tensions - and in particular, at the head of a three-decade struggle for improved gender rights (see Nikki R Keddie, "Iranian women and the Islamic Republic", 24 February 2009).

Across this period in Iran's modern history, the varying trajectory of the women's movement - and

the government's reaction to it - helps explain the rise and fall of wider political trends: reformism, secularism and the conservative backlash evidenced in the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005. This point can be illustrated by reference to three historic turning-points in which changes in the Iranian women's movement were enmeshed with key political and ideological arguments in Iran as a whole.

A new horizon

The first major transition for women since the formation of the Islamic Republic came with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. This, combined with the election of Hashemi Rafsanjani as president in the aftermath of the devastating Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), ushered in a period of economic reconstruction and moderation designed to stimulate the Iranian economy and return Iran to the international community. For women, this was a period of greater economic investment in the country's institutions, with an expansion of the education system in particular opening doors and opportunities.

Yet greater educational access did not translate into increased levels of employment. The vice that trapped many women - an ailing economy with double-digit unemployment and a dominant patriarchal culture - hampered their entrance into the job market and forced them into gender-acceptable professions. At the same time, the resources of a better education and the increased expectations it brought, combined with the restrictions of a gender-unequal society, also motivated a new generation of women to demand more from the government.

A rainbow moment

The second big transition for women arrived in May 1997, when women played an indispensable part in the election of Rafsanjani's successor Mohammad Khatami as president. The reformist leader's promise of greater political liberalisation and an enlarged role for civil society - the so-called "Tehran spring" - was reflected both in the media and on the streets: by a newly vibrant press, greater openness in social and political dialogue, and a relaxing of Islamist restrictions on the dress code and everyday behaviour.

An increased provision of government licenses during Khatami's tenure (1997-2005) meant that the women's press too blossomed in this period. The magazine Zanan was the most effective at addressing controversial gender issues. In this atmosphere of government encouragement and approval of NGO activity, female activism flourished. Though Khatami's administration proved ineffective in securing substantial legal improvements, the liberal ferment created new spaces of dialogue and interaction among women's activists (both secular and Islamic). This cooperation led, for example, to direct protests and petitions in favour of gender equality, and to public celebrations of International Women's Day.

The election of a reformist majlis (parliament) in 2000 increased the sense of momentum behind the campaign for legal reforms. Yet the parliament had limited success in passing gender legislation, including the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

A conservative backlash against the reform movement grew during Khatami's second term in office (from 2001) - evident in the closing of newspapers, institutional constraints on the president's powers, the repression of the student movement and the barring of would-be parliamentary

candidates by the Guardian Council.

A reversing tide

This conservative restoration, capped by the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2005, propelled the women's movement into a third transition. The new president sought to revive the "authentic" ideology of the revolution in order to consolidate the Islamic state against its social critics, in part by reimposing strict social mores. The result was to shift Iran's political landscape decisively to the right.

Women's activists, still intent on fulfilling the potential the reformist wave had created, responded by initiating a direct challenge to the regressive gender laws still enshrined in the Iranian constitution. The most visible example was the "one million signatures" campaign that began in 2006, which sought through a referendum-type model of collective action both to increase public awareness and exert pressure on the government to implement gender-law reform. The campaign did generate public attention, but also provoked the government into severe repression of activists through arrests and detentions (see Nasrin Alavi, "Women in Iran: repression and resistance", 5 March 2007).

In 2007, Ahmadinejad's government proposed a new and retrograde family-protection bill. The most deleterious clause is Article 23, which would institutionalise polygamy. The Islamic law applied in Iran permits men to have up to four wives, though in practice polygamy is rare (and indeed is widely condemned). The existing statute requires a man to have permission from his first wife before taking another, and that they should treat their wives equally. The new provision on polygamy would allow a husband to take a second wife without permission from his current wife on a number of grounds (including the first wife becoming sterile, and her contraction of a terminal illness). In addition, the bill reduces the age of (female) eligibility for marriage from 16 to 13; and its Article 25 would require a woman to pay taxes on money received from her marriage contract.

A fourth phase

For three years, women activists have agitated against the bill, arguing that these measures would damage (rather than protect) the family structure and reduce women's marriage and divorce rights. These protests were vital in the bill being referred to the parliament's legal committee for more work in 2008, when the majlis was due to vote on it. Now, as the post-election wave of suppression fuels the government's desire both to reassert its conservative agenda and subdue the undefeated women's movement, the bill has resurfaced on parliament's agenda.

For many Iranian women, such setbacks are also a tribute to the challenge their activism continues to present to the authorities. In the thirty years since the revolution, women have sought to build on every opportunity to advance the movement for gender equality. So far, the hardest actions of a powerful state - arrests, exile, legal sanction - have been unable to destroy the wellsprings of women's awareness and agency, which continue to blossom in the face of great pressure. The potential for a fourth transition is there.

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P.S.

* Source: OpenDemocracy.net:

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/sanam-vakil/irans-women-movement-in-transition>