

Iran, who remembers 8 march 1979 ?

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Interview of Fariba by Shirin Shalkooi, Brussels February 2019.

Can you introduce yourself ?

I'm Fariba, I'm a communist women and a member of the *8 March Women's Organisation (Iran-Afghanistan)* [1]. It is an independent and democratic organisation with a revolutionary approach. By « democratic », we mean that women from different ideology and backgrounds can be a member of our organisation. « Independent » means that we are separate from the men and from political parties or governmental institutions. Women of Afghanistan are the most oppressed women in Iran, they are not considered as citizens in the country so a lot of afghan women leaving in Iran won't call themselves Iranian.

The statistics of violence against women is increasing. In 2014, there had been a series of acid attacks in the city of Isfahan by men who judged that women didn't wear their hijab properly. By that time, we understood that we needed to build a coalition with other women to act on the long run and not just occasionally. Two years ago, we started to work in a campaign named *Karzar* (#kaarzaar) [2] to fight state, social and domestic violence against women in Iran. The campaign involved women from the 8 march organisation but also other activists, women's organisations and leftists. For us, revealing the link between the three different chains of violences - social, domestic and state - is really essential. If we use only the term « violence against women », it is frequently argued by leftist to focus only on the violence of the state and to put the domestic violence aside. When you speak about social (violence in public spaces) or domestic violence, some feminists can put the state violence aside. We claim that there are different chains that work together and that we have to fight them all. Another important political position of *Karzar* is that we all do agree that there is no possibility that the women's situation changes without overthrowing the islamic regime of Iran. Other political organisations are in the opposition of the regime such as the People's Mujaheddin (National Council Of Resistance of Iran) who are pro-imperialist or the Monarchist, but we are totally different from them too. *Karzar* is a coalition in exile, most of the women live in Belgium, England, The Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Turkey and Sweden. Some women in Iran do follow us but we don't make any official contact because it is too dangerous for them.

What are the key point of the actuality ?

After the takeover of the Islamic regime in February 1979, we always had resistance in the society. But, last year, in *Dey mah* [3] there was a major class uprising that changed the whole political atmosphere. Before that, the hegemony of the political ideology of opposition was reformism. If you wanted to do something, everyone was answering you "we need time", "we can change something with another President"... We changed some faces like Moussavi, Khatami or Rohani but it didn't change anything in our political situation because all of them defend the interest of the ruling class.

The *Dey protests* were really important because nobody could believe the huge anger of the people who shouted that they didn't want the Islamic regime anymore. Poor people, ethnic minorities, women and men, took the streets in hundred cities and villages that, as a political activist, I didn't even know that they existed. It was a snub to the reformist who spread the idea that the worker class and less educated people do support the regime. Since the *Dey protests*, the reformist lost some power and it is the best moment to talk about changes and alternatives.

This year, 2019, is the 40th anniversary of the takeover of the Revolution by the Islamic regime. At that time, the Islamic fundamentalists took the power but the revolution wasn't made by them. It started with leftist, communist and secular organisations. The leftists did a big mistake by thinking that they could go hand in hand with the Islamists against the *Shah* [4] and the imperialist powers. Because most of the Iranian people are religious, they thought that they could use Khomeini [5] as an Islamic ideological leader for the revolution and that they will be able to change the society after it. But Khomeini had his own plans, he wanted to build an Islamic State and the *Hezbollah* party [6]. After two years of political freedom just after the revolution, the regime began to forbid all other political parties. During 7 years, they have arrested and killed thousands and thousands activists and political opponents. We lost them physically but we also lost their experiences, this is a big loss for the young generations who grew only under the hegemony of the Islamic regime. Most of the rest of the « generation of the revolution » is either in exile, or no more politically active. In the nineties, the regime started to give some freedom for the reformist parties to be built but it wasn't parties built by the people, they were parties, organizations and unions built by the reformist part of the government, parties built from the top and controlled by the regime. They made fake « trade unions » and fake « organisations » to control and profile the activists.

Ten years ago, before the «Iranian green movement» in 2009, we had a movement of students, workers, teachers and women. After the uprising of December 2017, all those movements and specially the environmentalist, the women, the drivers, the nurses and the teachers, became more radical. For example, there are new unofficial trade unions trying to stay independent from the state like the workers struggle of the sugar refinery of Haft Tapeh. This radicalism doesn't come from nowhere. During the last ten years, the Iranian regime had to establish more and more relationship with the western advanced capitalist countries. They call themselves anti-imperialist but it is just a varnish. They had the illusion that those relations will help them to solve the effects of the worldwide capitalist crisis. Rohani signed the nuclear deal in 2015 with the P5+1 (America, Russia, China, United-Kingdom, France and Germany) which brought more capital and enabled them to sign official contracts with the cartels. But, in every countries, neoliberalism policies increase the gap between the rich and the poor. In May 2018, Trump announced the withdrawal of US from the agreement and re-established strong economic sanctions. In nearly one night, the prices of essential livelihood tripled. Can you imagine that ? You can not find the products imported from the west like pampers or women's sanitary products anymore. Some workers didn't get paid for one year (one or two months payments for one year is the best situation). This concerns both the public and the private sectors which is however, really difficult to make the distinction between them in Iran. For example, numerous guards of Sepah-e Pasdaran, the paramilitary army of the regime, are the owners of the so-called «private» companies. A lot of small companies had to close down and a lot of people are jobless for years. We see situations that we never faced, some people sleep in the cemeteries empty graves because they don't have other shelter.

The climate and the environmental questions are also important issues. Scientists say that many parts of Iran will soon become uninhabitable. The situations in the countryside is generally worse because some people don't have access to water. The war of water has started in Iran. In Isfahan last week, we could see that they run the water back in the famous Zayendeh river but it is mostly for the tourism. The decision makers bring the water from other cities and villages mostly from the

arab residence areas of Iran. The environmental problem mixes with the national question because the water is taken from poor region where people of the minorities don't have any rights. Isfahan is a good example because it has a lot of steel industries which need a lot of water but the city is in the middle of the desert. Can you imagine ? It is really crazy. The Shah wanted to build industries for the prestige of the city, to bring power in the center. Now, in one hand (for example in Haft-Tappe) if they want to keep the industries, it takes all the water. And in the other hand, if they close them, there is five thousand workers who lose their job. These are some examples of the conflicts between the benefit and welfare of people and the neoliberalism agenda of the islamic regime.

The crisis that capitalism has brought upon in Iran is not just economical, it is also political. There is contradictions inside the Iranian regime but also between the Iranian regime and western countries and between the Iranian regime and other powers in the Middle East. Inside the regime itself, the government don't know how to solve the crisis and there is no unity as it was 30 years ago. Historically, there is two big political positions. The ones who think that we need to reinforce the ideologic varnish of the islamic regime and keep our allies like Russia and China against « imperialism » because the opposition against America is important for the supporters and sympathisers of the islamic regime. In the other hand, there is the "Rohani part" which think that we have to develop more relations with the west to fulfill the neoliberalism agenda of the regime : to fit themselves into the global market by providing a cheap labor source as well as providing a big consumers market. After Trump's last move, both positions are in crisis. We fear a war with America but it is not easy to predict. In my idea, we are already in war, not inside Iran but in Syria, in Afghanistan, in Yemen, in Iraq, in Palestine, in Lebanon. Everywhere the Iranian regime makes war to strengthen its front against America and its allies like Israel, Saudi Arabia and sometimes Turkey. There is a strong nationalism tendency in Iran and a lot of Iranians are racist against the arabs, afghans and people from ethnic minorities. However, the regime does not acknowledge these complexities, for the Iranian regime, either you are with them or you are with America. This dynamic is really important both for the Iranian and the American regime because it prevents people to think about alternatives.

About anti-imperialism, one of the biggest mistakes of the communists was that they didn't understand that the essence of imperialism is based on relations of production. Some communists think imperialism is only the USA, because it is the world's first military power and they attack everywhere. But imperialism is relations of production and the Iranian regime was never anti-imperialist. From the very beginning, they had the exact same interests in international economic relationships as defined by imperialism. Some parties like PTB [7] and other currents make that mistake, but they didn't experience the kind of revolution we did. The Iranian regime reproduces imperialistic economical relationships with its neighbours, for example in Syria. So they cannot call themselves "anti-imperialist". For that, they would need to be socialist, what Iran has never been so far. It's a very big mistake of some parts of the Western left to support this regime and consider Iranian regime to be an anti-imperialist regime only based on its fake facade. Another common mis-approach towards regimes like Iran is the argument of cultural relativism and arguing that "Iranians are not ready for socialism, or anti-capitalism, or women's liberation". But it's not true !

Can you talk about the situation of the women and why march is an important month for the women's movement in Iran ?

The problem of economical gap and the class gap firstly and directly affects women. Women are the first to be under economical pressure, the first victims of poverty, as everywhere. The poverty and prolétariat are feminine. In Iran it's the same.

In most of the Third World Countries, we still have a mix between slavery, feudalism and the modern capitalist wage system. Also, the Islamic State uses religion as an ideological tool of power and

domination. The Iranian Islamic regime was the first to build an Islamic State with God as the ultimate leader. All these relationships support and feed the subordination of the women that we call the patriarchal oppression. The Imams updated the Islamic religion orders from thousands of years ago to use it in a "modern" capitalist state but a lot of the Sharia laws are still based on slavery and feudalism. For example, a father has the right to kill his own wife or daughter that he suspects of having sexual relations with a man.

The women are trapped in a contradiction because the wage system and neoliberalism give them more right to go out of the home, to go to work or to study. But, in another hand the Islamic fundamentalist ideology considers that their place is only at home. That is why the regime imposes the hijab, so that women have to show that when they go out of their husband or father's home, they are still under their control, the control of the state and the control of God. Hijab functions as a portable prison for women. It is not easy to be a woman in this contradiction. Some revolutionary communists don't understand that laws have a real impact on the life of the people. If women want to resist and fight the Islamic regime, they first need some basic minimum bourgeois democratic rights to be full citizens. In Iran, when someone kills somebody, he has to pay an amount of money (called *Diya* and means blood money). This money is halved when the victim is a woman. If a woman gives a testimony in court, her words have half the value of a man's words. This means that you are officially considered as half of a man. You don't have the right to study, to work or to travel without your father or your husband's permission. Of course, a lot of women do it, especially women from the big cities, but men potentially have the right to control women and prevent them from doing any of those things. They also have the right to rape and to beat them. If a stranger does rape you, he can easily use the argument that you were not wearing your hijab properly or that you didn't have the permission to go out. If a woman is married, it is likely that having a relationship with another man is easily sentenced to death by stoning.

Two weeks after Khomeini came to power, the first reactionary sign was to force women to cover themselves in public spaces. All over the world, the very first attacks of the reactionary forces primarily aim women. It is the case in Afghanistan with the Taliban, in Iraq with Daesh (ISIS), in America with Trump. In Iran, it was in March 1979. During six days, thousands of women went out in the streets to protest against the Ayatollah's *Fatwa*. Compared to the other demonstrations during the revolution, this one was not the biggest but it was mostly women. They were attacked by the Islamic militants with acid, guns and razor blades. We call this women's demonstration "the birth of the new women's movement" because it was the first time in the history of the country that women went in the streets to fight for gender issues. Women went in the streets for the revolution, for economical reasons, against the war and for many other social topics but not gender oppression. They were really, really, brave to oppose Khomeini at that time because almost everyone was accepting him as a leader and almost all the parties considered him as a progressive anti-imperialist leader. Women were the first to understand that the regime was reactionary and they had a famous slogan: "we didn't make revolution to go backward, we made revolution to go forward". This history is poorly known and not properly conveyed. We try to keep it alive with the women's movement. There are some books, articles, interviews and also the small movie "année zéro" made by the French movement for the women's liberation (MLF). The women's political role at that moment was not recognised by the communist, socialist and secular people. Unfortunately, back then, in some leaflets of political forces and even leftists, women were called "bourgeois", "monarchist", "sympathisers of the Shah family, Ashraf or Farah", "bitch". After the attacks on the women, the regime starts to attack ethnics, Turkmen, Kurds, Arab, gay people, and other minority groups. And then, after all, left parties. As told by a German poet "first they came for ... then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me".

As women, we have to resist against many things and fight for everything: for what we want to wear,

to eat, to say, for the way we want to be or to act, for the right to go to school, to come home late, to do sport,... From first thing in the morning, you start "against my father, my brother, my husband". The regime controls your bed, your privacy : "with whom you are, why, how long and what is the result?". When you resist for everything, you are like a soldier who is permanently on-call. Women fight via their own creative ways to survive in the daily life and also to go forward, to change their condition. Step by step. 60 percent of the students in university are women which means that they want to be in the public spaces. *Dey mah* was important because when the whole society is against the regime, it gives you more driving force, power and place to show that you refuse the control of your body.

The women who took off their scarves in the public places not only for a picture but to stay there, to fight, to convey a message. These are women who want to overthrow the regime. For me, as a revolutionary women whose concern is women's emancipation, acquiring the right to clothing is not the goal, it is a very basic right that everybody should have. Our fight against compulsory Hijab is not limited to the right to clothing, but it has another, deeper level and that is the concept of Hijab. Hijab has a special function, it is the flag of the islamic regime on women's body. It is the symbol of women subordination, treating women as a commodity and sex object. The patriarchal oppression in the capitalist exploitation system needs to control women's body as a tool for reproduction. It is not just a question of religion and ideology, it has actual material bases. If we get a secular regime it will not automatically mean that the control of women's body will stop.

Why do we need an international struggle according to you ?

We need to learn from each other, not to copy. We can't dictate our way of fighting to the others but we need to learn from our respective achievements. With Karzar, it is really important for us to strengthen our voices. We don't support neither the Iranian islamic regime, neither the imperialist intervention.

I don't want the Belgian women to fight against the Iranian regime in Iran, we can do that. I do want them to fight against their own regime in Belgium, that is their role. If they fight well, it will be easier for us to fight there. Imperialism works because anti-imperialist movements in western countries are weak. If the women's movement has a revolutionary face in Belgium, not a reformist one, of course we will get more victory in Iran. For me, that is the meaning of internationalism. I don't fight only for the freedom of the Iranian people. If we overthrow the Iranian regime in a revolutionary way, we open a window for the people of many Middle Eastern and islamic fundamentalist countries to fight against their regimes.

We have a lot to teach to the feminist women in the western countries. If they learn the lessons about the reactionary forces in Iran, they can understand the danger of the far-right. Internationalism is not begging western feminist to come to our demonstrations and make speeches for us. Of course, it is nice and it shows support, but we need more. We need a united comprehensive international fight against the patriarchal class systems all over the world.

Support : join the rally in Brussels in front of the iranian embassy, friday 8 march at 2.30pm
<https://www.facebook.com/events/2150591008330802/>

Other articles to go further :

Dominique Lerouge, ESSF (article 43456), [Iran : 39 ans après le 8 mars 1979 :](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article43456)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article43456>

Frieda Afary, ESSF (article 47941), [Iran: Ongoing Labor Strikes, Women's Protests and Ideas for](#)

[International Solidarity](#) :

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47941>

Alliance of Middle East Socialists

<https://www.allianceofmesocialists.org/womens-emancipation-gender-and-sexual-minorities/>

Footnotes

[1] www.8mars.com

[2] *Karzar* means « campaign » in farsi

[3] The month of December 2017.

[4] King of the iranian monarchy

[5] Khomeiny was the first Ayatollah (Supreme Leader) of the Islamic Republic of Iran

[6] The party of God.

[7] Parti des Travailleurs (Belgique).