

# Is Time on Iranian Women Protesters' Side?

Thursday 27 August 2009, by [MIR-HOSSEINI Ziba](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2006).

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In early June, *Zanestan* — an Iran-based online journal — announced a rally in Haft Tir Square, one of Tehran's busiest, to protest legal discrimination suffered by Iranian women. The demonstration was also called to commemorate two landmark events in women's struggle for equality in Iran. The first was the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, when women agitated for emancipation. The second was the June 12, 2005 women's rally for revision of the constitution of the Islamic Republic. According to *Zanestan*, the June 12, 2006 reprise would raise specific demands: a ban on polygamy, equal rights to divorce for women and men, joint custody of children after divorce, equal rights in marriage, an increase in the minimum legal age of marriage for girls to 18, and equal rights for women as witnesses. The protesters would call, in other words, for redress of the gender inequalities embedded in the dominant interpretations of Islamic law upon which the constitution is based.

Observers awaited the protest with apprehension, for various reasons. With conservative hardliners in control of the legislative, executive and judicial authorities, even to plan such an event was an act of great courage — or, some might say, foolhardiness. Several prominent reformist women, and some of the activists who had organized the 2005 rally, questioned the wisdom of a repeat performance in the current atmosphere. In their view, the confrontation with the United States over the nuclear issue, like Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion, provides the hardliners with a pretext for blaming internal dissent on an outside enemy, so as to suppress it violently. They felt it was not in the interest of the women's movement to stage a public protest at a time like this, and their names did not appear on the list of supporters.

The police did indeed forcibly stop the rally before it started, but that may not be the end of the story. Does the fact that the rally was organized at all portend a major change in the gender politics of the Islamic Republic, marked by increasing activism by educated, middle-class women? Has the gender politics of the Islamic Republic produced its own antithesis? Will these women now be able to carry Iranian women's century-old struggle for equal rights to fruition? What are the issues at stake?

## HISTORY'S IRONY

Educated, middle-class women participated in the 1978-1979 revolution, and, like other Iranian women, they did so not with specific "women's" objectives, but as part of different political and social forces. Those who belonged to secular, leftist and nationalist groups opposed to the Shah's regime were marginalized soon after the revolution, but they did make themselves heard on March 8, 1979. On that International Women's Day, thousands of women marched in Tehran and Shiraz to inveigh against the discriminatory laws being introduced by the new Islamic Republic. The marches

were organized to register activists' objections to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's call on women employed in government offices to observe "Islamic *hejab*," and to the dismantling of the 1967 Family Protection Law that had placed women more or less on the same footing as men in access to divorce and child custody. Religious zealots attacked the marchers, accusing them of following the West's agenda. But the protest was so large that the provisional government had to reassure women that they had misunderstood Khomeini's message. There was no plan for compulsory veiling, they said, and they promised to set up new family courts.

But the respite was temporary. Islamist ideology was ascendant, and the onset of war with Iraq in September 1980 effectively silenced critics of the new order. In due course, *hejab* was indeed made mandatory, and gender discrimination was written into the constitution of the post-revolutionary state. Many of the women who organized that first rally were executed or imprisoned; others were hounded into exile. Most of those who remained lost hope and were forced into uneasy quiescence. Women loyal to the new regime's Islamist ideology assumed the mantle of promoting women's rights, and in time they managed to modify the harsher edges of some laws and tone down the official gender rhetoric.

In the early 1990s, secular women activists began to add their voices to the emerging dissent among religious-minded women, but it was another decade before they could again protest in public against gender discrimination in the law. Meanwhile, much has changed in Iranian society. The population is far more educated than before the revolution. Literacy is at around 80 percent nationwide, and over 90 percent among those below the age of 25. There are 22 million students, around 3 million enrolled in universities, and over half of these are women. As the state's Islamist ideology has lost its lustre, society has — paradoxically — experienced a form of "secularization" from below and given birth to what is now openly referred to as "Islamic feminism." It is history's irony that the revolution that brought the clerics into power also sowed the seeds of a new intellectual and popular movement for the separation of the institution of religion from that of the state, if not of faith from politics. The failure of former President Mohammad Khatami and reformist parliamentarians to fulfill their campaign promises, in the face of fierce opposition from sections of the clerical establishment, has only added to the legitimacy of the secularist movement and the urgency of its demands.

## **SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER**

The presidential elections of 2005 presented women activists with a window of opportunity. Since the mid-1990s, electoral campaigns have been rare moments when the authorities' tolerance level rises along with the political temperature, and when activists can hope to air contentious issues without fear of repression.

The political temperature in June 2005 was exceptionally high. Khatami's two terms as president, and the tug of war between the reformists within the system and their opponents, had lifted taboos. A burgeoning, if fragile civil society had emerged. Shirin Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize had lent confidence and hope to women activists. In October 2003, a group of young activists led thousands of men and women who gathered to welcome Ebadi home at Mehrabad airport. In December, some of these women gathered once again to collect funds and provide humanitarian services following the Bam earthquake disaster. These women activists regularly celebrated March 8 as Women's Day, organizing seminars, lectures and events in universities and cultural centers, to which reformist women in Parliament (in Persian, *Majles*) or government ministries were sometimes invited. Khatami had created a Center for Women's Participation, headed by Vice President Zahra Shoja'i, who encouraged the formation of women's NGOs. The number of registered women's NGOs rose from 67 in 1997 to 480 in 2005. The reformist-dominated Sixth *Majles* (2000-2004) passed many bills in

women's favor, though most — including the proposal to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) — were rejected by the Guardian Council, the unelected clerical body constitutionally empowered to vet legislation for adherence to “Islamic” principles. The most profound changes, however, were happening in society at large, the most visible being the relaxation of the dress code, the “Islamic hejab” that was imposed upon all women in 1983. Colorful and stylish outfits made their way back into the streets, and unwritten gender segregation rules were broken.

Then, in February 2004, the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei made sure that the Seventh Majles returned to conservative control. All 12 women deputies, with one exception, are conservatives intent on reversing the gender policies of the reformists. They have vowed not to tolerate the discussion of women's rights outside the framework of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and to fight against laxity in hejab. The only bill that these women have so far introduced is one to establish “National Dress.”

Against this backdrop, and just five days before the first round of the presidential elections, a coalition of women's rights activists rallied against the systemic discrimination that women face in law. The June 12 event was preceded by two smaller protests. The first took place on June 1 when a coalition of religious and secularist women activists staged a sit-in in front of the president's office to protest the ban on women running for president. Then, on June 9, a hundred younger women activists gathered in front of Azadi Stadium during the Iran-Bahrain soccer game, and succeeded in forcing their way in to watch the second half, in effect breaking the ban on admitting women to matches.

But the June 12 rally took women's demands for equal rights and access to a different level, framing the issue as a constitutional problem. Among the women involved were many who were arguing for a boycott of the elections and a referendum to change the constitution; this made prominent women reformists, whether in government or in political parties, wary of supporting them. Mosharekat, the largest and most progressive reformist party, had nominated as their presidential candidate Mustafa Moin, who had chosen former Majles deputy Elaheh Koulaee as his spokesperson, organized sessions with women activists, and proposed a progressive program on gender rights. These women still hoped that change could come through elections.

The coalition of women activists who organized the June 2005 rally had another reading of the situation. They saw the time as ripe for creation of an independent women's movement, for divorcing women's struggle for equality from dependence on the political fortunes of men of power. Secular feminist writer Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani explains their reasoning:

*“We had several options: the first was to support a political front that was considered to be more democratic. This seemed to me logical, since, clearly, the further political space expands, the better conditions for women's activities will be. A second option was to use the opportunity and the political opening that always comes during election [campaigns] to air our independent voice. A third option was to ignore this opening, not to do anything, and to leave everything to the future”. [1]*

They chose the second option, prepared to take the risk of turning their back on the state. Thus the rally became the official birth of what they proclaimed as “the women's movement.” Estimates of the numbers gathered on June 12 in front of Tehran University vary from a few hundred to several thousand. The rally started peacefully. Simin Behbahani, the famous septuagenarian poet, recited some verse, and a couple of solidarity statements were read, including one from Shirin Ebadi. Then the paramilitary forces that had surrounded the women started to close in, provoking anti-regime slogans from bystanders. The women protesters sat down, chanting an anthem written for the

occasion, but the paramilitary forces eventually succeeded in disrupting the rally. There were clashes, and the police started dispersing the protesters, though none were arrested. All this took place under the eyes of the international media in Iran to cover the elections. The actor Sean Penn published his eyewitness account in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Statements that were not read out loud were posted on women's websites, celebrating the birth of an independent women's movement. The experience enhanced the women activists' confidence, and they resolved to continue their peaceful protests until their demands for legal equality were met.

## **ENTER AHMADINEJAD**

Few of the women at the rally anticipated the result of the first round of the presidential elections: the two (out of seven) candidates who survived to compete in the second round were the former president, the old clerical autocrat Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the unknown hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Some women activists joined a spontaneous campaign in support of Rafsanjani, but it was too late. In hindsight, whether or not there was behind-the-scenes manipulation of the ballot, Ahmadinejad's popular appeal, with his promises to introduce social justice, combat corruption and dole out oil money to the people, made the result inevitable.

The promise of social justice did not extend to women. While the other candidates had vied for the female vote, Ahmadinejad was silent on women's rights. Asked whether he would have a female minister in his cabinet, all he said was: "We are all part of a nation and should not have a 'gender gaze' (*negah-e jensiyati*); the most suitable person should be chosen. Discrimination [based on gender] has negative consequences in different realms." [2] The statement was highly ambiguous, probably by design. It could be read as liberal and modern, but if so, it contradicted the gender ideology of the president's political base, the Coalition of Developers (Abadgaran). These are radical anti-reformists, backed by a section of the Revolutionary Guards, who emerged as power brokers during the 2003 Tehran city council elections, when they had made Ahmadinejad mayor of the capital.

The new president replaced Zahra Shoja'i with Nasrin Soltankhah, a member of Tehran's city council, whose first act was to change the name of the Center for Women's Participation to the Center for Women and Family Affairs. She then ordered the pulping of many of its publications, and brought a court case against Shoja'i for "misusing public money." When Soltankhah was forced to resign (as she could not hold two posts at once), she was replaced by Zohreh Tabibzadeh Nouri, who declared that Iran would not ratify CEDAW as long as she was in charge. Meanwhile, the minister of culture and Islamic guidance issued a directive limiting women's work outside the home to daylight hours. This measure was advertised as giving women time to fulfill their family duties.

Restrictions on celebrating March 8, which the reformists had relaxed, were reinstated for 2006, and some women's meetings planned in universities were canceled. A few small-scale meetings took place, and the women's commission of the Mosharekat party held a seminar to mark International Women's Day as on a par with the official Iranian Women's Day, held on the (lunar) birthday of Fatima, the prophet Muhammad's daughter. But police and paramilitary forces broke up a March 8 meeting organized by women activists in a central Tehran park, where some women, including Simin Behbahani, were beaten. The women injured that day have launched a formal complaint, and are being represented by Shirin Ebadi. The case has not yet been heard.

As expected, *hejab*, and women's presence in public, once again became major issues. On April 11, a member of Abadgaran on the Tehran city council objected in a speech to women crossing "red lines" by wearing tiny headscarves and fashionable manteaus. A week later, a group of 200 women from

conservative “martyrs’ families” staged a sit-in in front of Parliament, chanting, “Majles of Hizbullah, where is Allah’s law?” Other sit-ins followed, in front of judicial and presidential offices, demanding that action be taken against “immodestly dressed” (*bad-hejab*) women. The head of the Tehran police announced that from April 21 they would deal harshly with people he described as “those sporting short trousers, covering their hair with small and narrow scarves, and wearing tight and short uniforms.” [3]

There was nothing new so far. It was merely the annual ritual of official threats and conservative consternation over the loosening strictures on women’s attire. Since the late 1990s, this ritual has begun with the approach of summer and faded away as the heat sets in. What was different in 2006 was that proponents of compulsory hejab, who had blamed the reformists for not punishing “immodest” women, now argued for “cultural means” to deal with the problem. Ahmadinejad joined the chorus, and the police came up with a new strategy. Male police, accompanied by female colleagues, used persuasion rather than force — that is, instead of arresting “bad-hejab” girls and women to be fined by the courts, they merely stopped them and issued warnings, as well as guidance toward “the right path.”

On April 24, with the seasonal ritual in full swing, Ahmadinejad wrote to the head of the Sports Organization, directing him to make provision for the admission of women to soccer stadiums as spectators. “Despite some [individuals’] perception and propaganda, experience shows that the widespread presence of women and families in public places [ensures] that social health, morals and chastity become dominant in these places.” [4]

Ahmadinejad’s directive to lift the unwritten ban on women attending soccer matches took everyone by surprise. It made national and international headlines, and was followed by a week of intense debate, the president facing fierce opposition from his allies on the Tehran city council and in Parliament, the clerical establishment and the press. Women activists gave the directive a cautious welcome. In an April 29 editorial on the front page of the reformist daily *Sharq*, Shadi Sadr, a lawyer and women’s rights activist, pointed out that women had first demanded access to stadiums, like other public spaces, during Rafsanjani’s presidency in the 1990s. This demand had only become a problem for the authorities during the past two years, when women activists assembled in front of stadiums during matches to assert that entry was their right as citizens. Though they were insulted and beaten, and managed to enter only once, their activism turned a personal demand by a few girls into a social issue to which even Ahmadinejad’s government is not immune. Sadr went on to stress that, to achieve their rights, women must generate political will. Women’s rights activists should therefore applaud Ahmadinejad’s directive, as, regardless of his motives, it indicates his need to expand his constituency to urban middle-class strata. Opposition to the directive comes from his allies and the clerical establishment, which puts their gender ideology once more into question. Women could end up as winners in this political game, Sadr concluded.

Meanwhile, four religious authorities (*maraje’*) issued *fatwas* forbidding women’s admission to soccer matches, even if they sit in separate sections apart from men. The clerics reiterated the jurisprudential argument that underlies the rulings on *hejab* and gender segregation: “Looking at the uncovered bodies of unrelated members of the opposite sex is sexually stimulating, and the mixing of men and women leads to social corruption.” [5] The *fatwas* unleashed a flurry of responses and counter-responses in the press and on websites, which brought to the surface not only differences of opinion among the clerics and the hardliners, but also the unsoundness of the arguments of those for whom gender segregation and strict observance of *hejab* are the only guarantee of public morality. For a week, the president remained silent and let his cultural advisers defend his position. Then, on May 1, the Leader brought the debate to an abrupt end, urging the president to respect the opinion of the *maraje’*. By mid-May, the affair was over. But women with short trousers, narrow scarves and tight, hip-length tunics were going about their business in



Tehran as usual, and their war of attrition with the authorities went on as before.

The suspension of Ahmadinejad's directive on stadiums, and the reversal of his earlier position on *hejab*, indicate both the limits of his power and the authorities' recognition of their need to come to terms with society today. Both the discourse and the practice of *hejab* went through profound transformations during the reformist era, and even hardliners like Ahmadinejad, when in office, have to adjust to contemporary realities. In current reformist discourse, *hejab* is not seen as a woman's "duty," but as her "right." Many reformists oppose compulsory *hejab* on religious grounds, as it can have meaning and value only when a woman has the right to choose it freely. For the generations of women born under the Islamic Republic, *hejab* has become a government imposition that can be defied with religious impunity. Women's access to soccer games is not yet an urgent issue, although at every major match, many young girls manage to get in by dressing as boys.

Ahmadinejad's directive and its fate complicated the situation for women activists, who until then had seen their oppositional stance in clear-cut terms. In Shadi Sadr's words: "Until the day of [the directive's] issue the space between the new government and women's movement was black and white. The head of the government who never revealed his stand on women could not be taken seriously by a women's movement that made some radical demands as an independent social movement in recent years." [6]

## **A DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD**

The June 12, 2006 rally never got off the ground. A day earlier, some of the organizers were summoned by security officers and warned that, if they went ahead with their plan, they would be met with force. They went ahead. Around 5 pm, when women started to assemble, they found a strong police presence in Haft Tir Square. A group of 20 to 30 women managed to get to the small park where the rally was due to gather, but as they started to chant the feminist anthem composed for the 2005 rally, they were chased away. Some were beaten, and a judicial spokesman confirmed on June 14 that over 70 arrests were made. All this was carried out by members of the newly created female police force, who grabbed protesters by the hair, squirted pepper spray in their faces, handcuffed them and beat them with batons before dragging them to the police vans. The policewomen proved rougher and more effective than their male counterparts, and protesters did not even get a chance to display their placards reading "Misogynist law must be abolished" and "We are women, we are human beings, we are citizens of this land, but we have no rights."

With Ahmadinejad's election, gender politics in the Islamic Republic entered a new phase. The unprecedented control of all branches of the state by one faction — the one with the most retrograde views on gender — has already radicalized women's demands. The opinions of reformist clerical leaders carry no weight with the hardliners, and there are no women left within the structure of power who will promote women's rights. Islamist women activists who used to lobby the religious and political authorities, and bargain with the government and the Majles for more rights, are no longer in a position to do so. Yet women's demands for equality are as strong as ever, and secular and middle-class women have found a new voice and legitimacy. But for this voice not to be silenced once more, and for the women's movement to reach its goals, these women must foster new alliances and new strategies. In Shadi Sadr's words:

*"Entering a social movement is like entering a struggle where at any moment the conditions and governing rules are changing; you must be all ears and eyes, equal to your rival, able to change your methods and even your mentality, without forgetting your principles and your ideals, and without departing one step from them. A social movement can succeed when it can display appropriate*

*reactions in a complex situation, when it has an answer for all relevant questions, and when it is not afraid to take difficult decisions. We must not forget that the easiest way is not always the best way.” [7]*

Women activists who organized the June 12 rally were not afraid of taking difficult decisions. It remains to be seen whether they were the right ones, or whether, as some activists who did not support the rally thought, they were inappropriate. They were right to frame their demands for legal equality in marriage and in society as part of women’s basic rights. This framing resonates with a large majority of Iranian women, even with the female commandos who herded them into paddywagons. But the protest organizers seem not to have done the work needed to articulate their demands in a form meaningful to ordinary women. The activists behind the rally call themselves “secular feminists” and make a conscious effort to avoid any engagement either with religious arguments or with “Islamic feminists.” Likewise, if they thought that the confrontation with the US over the nuclear issue, with the consequent world media focus on Iran, would provide them with a window of opportunity, as the campaign season did the year before, they were mistaken. What the hardliners in Iran need in order to survive is an outside enemy, and the Bush administration, with its broad hints of intervention, has been playing into their hands. The movement for women’s rights, like the reformist movement before it, is caught in the crossfire.

But if the nuclear crisis is resolved, and if women’s rights activists play their cards well, Ahmadinejad’s government might even prove to be their best ally in the long run. Either the hardliners will be tamed by the gap between their vision and reality, or they will go too far and spur new alliances among women whose common struggle became divided soon after the revolution into “Islamic” and “secular” camps. If this division — false, but pernicious — is overcome, women’s rights activists will have the kind of dynamism they need in order to transform their activism from a fringe of the educated middle class into a general movement. They have two powerful new weapons: first, the gender awareness that the Islamic Republic has unwittingly fostered, and second, cyberspace. The June 12 protest was planned and conducted via websites and blogs. Even if, unlike in 2005, the state crushed the rally, the Internet continues to disseminate worldwide the words of the protesters and images of the brutal treatment they received.

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## **P.S.**

\* From MERIP:

<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061606.html>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] “Middle-Class Women: From Theory to Action: A Conversation with Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani,” *Zanan* (February 2006).

[2] Noushin Tariqi, “Men Competing for Women’s Votes,” *Zanan* (May-June 2005).

[3] Maryam Mirza, “Once Again, Summer!” *Zanan* (April 2006).

[4] Parastou Dokouhaki, “Women’s Entry to Stadium Has Been Possible, But...,” *Zanan* (April 2006).

[5] BBC Persian, April 26, 2006.

[6] Shadi Sadr, "In the Fog: The Fate of Women's Presence in Stadiums," *Sharq*, May 30, 2006.

[7] Ibid.