
In Solidarity with People's Protest and Resistance in Iran

**A Compilation of Statements, Reports, Analysis and Appeals in Wake of
the Post Election Events of June 2009**

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Contents:

1. Open letter of support to the demonstrators in Iran (Scholars from around the world)
2. Do Not legitimise Ahmadinejad Government (A letter from Iranian Students in India)
3. Statement by a Group of Iranian Anti-war Activists about Iran's Presidential Elections
4. Neda, the image of Iran (Masoud Golsorkhi)
5. Marjan Satrapi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf speaking at the European Parliament on June 16, 2009 (Video)
6. In solidarity (Hanif Yazdi)
7. Iran: Myths and Realities - What do the people want? A look at the Media's presentation of the protest movement (Azar Majedi)
8. People of the world! We are your neighbours, friends, lovers, colleagues, and comrades (Maryiam Namazie and others)
9. Iranian Documentary Filmmakers ask Iranian Radio and TV to stop lying about recent events
10. Pakistan: Protest in Support of Iranian Workers
11. Iran's election opens generational fissure (Ramin Jahanbegloo)
12. I speak for Mousavi. And Iran (Mohsen Makhmalbaf)

13. Letter to Khamenei (Afshin Ellian)
14. Le régime paye son isolement international, par Azadeh Kian
15. An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran? (Shiva Balaghi)
16. Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived (Ervand Abrahamian)
17. Bloggingheads TV discussion on Iran. (Between Reza Aslan and Eli Lake,)
18. Global Electronic Sit-in In Solidarity with Iranians Protesting against the Rigged 2009 Presidential Elections
19. The Daily Cartoon 20th June 2006 (The Independent)
20. Robert Fisk's World: In Tehran, fantasy and reality make uneasy bedfellows
21. Robert Fisk: Khamenei is fighting for his own position as well as Ahmadinejad's
22. The evolution of Iran's revolution (Robin Wright)
23. Interview: 'Crisis of Legitimacy' in Iran (Arang Keshavarzian)
24. Theocracies Are Doomed. Thank God (Jon Meacham)
25. No Matter Who Is President of Iran, They Would Stone Me (Lila Ghobady)

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open letter of support to the demonstrators in iran

Friday 19 June 2009

This morning Ayatollah Ali Khamenei demanded an end to the massive and forceful demonstrations protesting the controversial result of last week's election. He argued that to make concessions to popular demands and 'illegal' pressure would amount to a form of 'dictatorship', and he warned the protestors that they, rather than the police, would be held responsible for any further violence.

Khamenei's argument sounds familiar to anyone interested in the politics of collective action, since it appears to draw on the logic used by state authorities to oppose most of the great popular mobilisations of modern times, from 1789 in France to 1979 in Iran itself. These mobilisations took shape through a struggle to assert the principle that sovereignty rests with the people themselves, rather than with the state or its representatives. 'No government can justly claim authority', as South Africa's ANC militants put it in their Freedom Charter of 1955, 'unless it is based on the will of all the people.'

Needless to say it is up to the people of Iran to determine their own political course. Foreign observers inspired by the courage of those demonstrating in Iran this past week are nevertheless entitled to point out that a government which claims to represent the will of its people can only do so if it respects the most basic preconditions for the determination of such a will: the freedom of the people to assemble, unhindered, as an inclusive collective force; the capacity of the people, without restrictions on debate or access to information, to deliberate, decide and implement a shared course of action.

Years of foreign-sponsored 'democracy promotion' in various parts of the world have helped to spread a well-founded scepticism about civic movements which claim some sort of direct democratic legitimacy. But the principle itself remains as clear as ever: only the people themselves can determine the value of such claims. We the undersigned call on the government of Iran to take no action that might discourage such determination.

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Letters to the Editor

Do Not legitimise Ahmadinejad Government

In the name of freedom and in solidarity with the protests of millions of our compatriots in Iran, to the Government of India,

The fraudulent elections on 12 June in Iran has led to a coup against the reformist candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and repression against the people who voted for him. The actual results, which were even confirmed by some people in authority in our country's Interior Ministry, show that Mousavi had won the election, but the current conservative government announced fake results.

Those whose votes have been appropriated in favour of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad are protesting in the streets of Tehran and other major cities demanding a full recount of the recent election or a fresh mandate. Up to now, protestors have faced violence from the police and security militias. There is a suppression of the press and television, while the means of communication have been blocked. Dozens of people have been killed and hundreds (if not thousands) of people and political activists have been arrested.

We, Iranian students in India, appeal to the government of India not to accept the fraudulent election results, which are being forced on the people of Iran and we urge it not to send messages of congratulations to an illegitimate president who is now violently suppressing the protests of its people.

Our nation is at a sensitive juncture in its path to democracy and the Iranian people will remember those nations who respect this struggle and stand by them in their hour of need.

A group of students from Iran

Statement by a Group of Iranian Anti-war Activists about Iran's Presidential Elections

Monday 8 June 2009

We are a group of Iranian academic and antiwar activists in Europe and the United States who, in the past few years, have consistently defended Iran's national interests in all areas including its right to develop peaceful nuclear technology. Our varied activities in the face of anti-Iran propaganda by the neoconservatives in the West have included organizing press conferences, taking part in radio and TV debates, creating antiwar websites, publishing bulletins and newsletters, writing opinion pieces and letters to editors, attending national and international antiwar conferences and petitioning and lobbying Western politicians and parliamentarians.

We have campaigned against the policies of the United States and its Western allies which have unjustifiably targeted Iran – including sending Iran’s nuclear dossier to the United Nations Security Council, issuing UNSC resolutions against Iran, secret and public efforts to provoke strife in Iran and destabilize the country, and threats by the United States and Israel for military intervention and bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities. As we approach Iran’s presidential elections, we are duty bound to share the lessons of our antiwar activities and highlight what national policies can defend Iran’s interests effectively in the international arena without isolating it or enduring U.N. sanctions.

In order to safeguard Iran’s national rights successfully, we think Iran’s president elect must give priority to the following policies in his programs and plans:

- (1) Questioning the Holocaust, which has greatly aided the hawks in the West, must be discarded and replaced with a constructive foreign policy devoid of any provocative rhetoric.
- (2) Release of all political prisoners, freedom of press, organization and political parties, as well as peaceful meetings and gatherings. Recognizing the right of all citizens to run for election without any political vetting.
- (3) Abolishing medieval punishments, such as stoning and cutting limbs, public executions and execution of minors.
- (4) Recognizing full and unconditional equality in all areas for women and ethnic minorities. Recognizing the full citizenship and civic rights of official and unofficial religious minorities.

Disregarding these tasks will seriously hinder the social and political development of the country, and will divide the Iranian people in their resistance against the unwarranted neo-colonial pressure and double standards of the Western powers. It will also provide powerful propaganda tools to hawks and their allies in mainstream media for isolating Iran and denying its fundamental rights in international organizations.

Taking steps to carry out these measures, on the other hand, will put our country on a fast track to progress, will unite Iranians of all walks of life, and disarm the neoconservatives in their aggressive propaganda against Iran.

Signed

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Professor Nader Sadeghi, George Washington University Hospital
Shirin Saeidi, University of Cambridge
Professor Muhammad Sahimi, University of Southern California
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Neda, the image of Iran

by **Masoud Golsorkhi** (23 June 2009)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/23/neda-iran-obama>

Marjan Satrapi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf speaking at the European Parliament on June 16, 2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7fiBxU8wEU>

In solidarity

The people of Iran want a democratically elected leader in power

by **Hanif Yazdi** (June 24, 2009)

THIS past winter in Iran, I searched in vain to find Iranian art films by Kiarostami, Makhmalbaaf, and others in Tehran's movie stores. I found a great deal that was pirated and Hollywood, and an increasing number of Hindi movies. But it was impossible, literally impossible, to find our Iranian films anywhere in Tehran. But here in Bangladesh, Iranian films, including ones I have never heard of, are available in many stores. On my last shopping excursion, I bought a copy of "Secret Ballot," an Iranian comedy about our ridiculous elections and burgeoning democracy.

The Iranian community in Dhaka is small, tight-knit, and eccentric to the last. One gentleman had been here for the last 35 years, grumbling about this place, railing against its every nook

and cranny, but somehow so in love that he learned Urdu, Sanskrit, Hindi, and (as he claimed, but I refused to believe) became the first Iranian to learn to read Bengali. Then there was the tea magnate who had lived here for 50 years, and the petro-man, and the one who imported carpets and handicrafts into Bangladesh.

We all sat around eating watermelon and imported kharboozeh, arguing intensely over whether khiaar was Arabic for cucumber, or whether it was really related to ikhtiyaar and hence never originally the name of a fruit. We then proceeded to find every last word (there are about 17,000) in common between Bengali and Persian, scratching our heads over why z's became j's and s's became sh's and finally, revealing that Mumtaz Mahal was actually an Iranian from Yazd.

I never, not in my wildest dreams, imagined that the first time I would vote in an Iranian election, I would be doing it in Bangladesh. On June 12, 2009, I voted at the Iranian embassy in Dhaka. I was proud to play my part, proud to ride a wave of hope that was sweeping our world. More than anything, I believed that this election would bring us a more just, humane, and representative government.

The days that followed revealed in no ambiguous terms that the Iranian government had declared war on our people. The officials who were charged with representing us, and the police who were sworn to protect us, have betrayed our trust. No matter what your political beliefs, or what you think of the Iran elections, no government has the right to treat us this way.

No government has the right to fire on us with live ammunition as we march peacefully in the streets, to drop chemicals on our heads from helicopters, to beat us like animals because we defy their demands to shut up and stay home. No one has the right to imprison us without cause, without trial and without end for no other crime than saying and writing what we believe.

My grandfather, Ibrahim Yazdi, was pulled from his hospital bed and taken to jail for his political views, his colleagues are still in prison, scores of students are dead in the streets and there is no end in sight.

I am an Iranian student, in Bangladesh to learn about this country, her people, and her proud history. And I know these people, the sons and daughters of the Mukhti Bahini, of democracy activists and freedom fighters will stand with us. I am asking all of you, as human beings, please stand with my people. A show of solidarity from Dhaka would show students in Iran

that Bangladeshis have heard their voice and that they stand with them against oppression, no matter the form or the place.

We Iranians know as well as anyone the dangers of western intervention and imperialism. Every Iranian can recite the events of 1953, when a CIA coup overthrew the democratic government of Mosaddegh. But fighting against Western Imperialism does not mean submitting to government brutality at home.

We Iranians will never accept that that we must choose between domestic tyranny and foreign domination. This is a false dichotomy created by people who wish to divert attention away from the real issues. No Iranian and no Bangladeshi should ever feel compelled to make such a choice.

We can fight for greater democracy and openness at home, while guarding against Western intervention. Those in the Iranian state media who are calling the street protestors "Western agents" are insulting the Iranian people's genuine and indigenous hunger for greater democracy and rights.

I have encountered in Bangladesh the kindest, most compassionate and genuine people I have ever met. Strangers pay for my bus fare, offer me their poems, and their houses for me to live in without a second thought. They walk long distances to get me to where I need to go and invite me into their lives without reservation. It is this caring for others that forms the beating heart of Bangladesh, a people who embody the philosophy of Shaikh Saadi who wrote in the thirteenth century:

Adam's children are limbs of one another,
Who, in their creation, are from one essence.
If one day a limb is pained,
The other limbs cannot remain at peace.
You who are unmoved by the suffering of others;
Let it not be that they name you "Human."
Hanif Yazdi is an Iranian student.

There will be a symbolic human chain supporting Iranian students' right to demonstrate peacefully for their rights today at 5:30pm, in front of Jatiyo Jadughar, Shahbag.

A look at the Media's presentation of the protest movement:

Iran: Myths and Realities

What do the people want?

by Azar Majedi

Iran is at the top of international news. What led to the mass protests? How did the situation change so dramatically over a week? What do people want? What will be the outcome of this protest movement? These are the questions discussed repeatedly on TV channels and in the press. Different political analysts and members of Iranian-American/European academia, all with different degrees of allegiance to the so-called state reformist camp, are invited to throw light on the situation. All these different commentators make one common assumption: "The people in Iran do not want a revolution." By this, they mean that the people do not want to overthrow the Islamic regime. They claim that the people want an evolution, a gradual road to change. They insist that people want some minor changes in the political system, a bit more freedom. They argue that people are protesting against Ahmadinezhad and the rigged election and not against the Islamic regime. Thus, if Mousavi becomes president, everything will return to normal.

This is the core of all analyses presented by the international media. From the Independent's so-called left wing, "anti-imperialist" Robert Fisk to the right wing reporter of the Financial Times, they repeat the same line. The former categorically claims that the people in Iran "are happy with the Islamic regime." He goes on to repeat the "anti-imperialist" cliché that people in Iran "do not want the West to tell them what to do. They do not want to be like the West." (Quoted interview with Aljazeera TV/English) As though wanting to get rid of the Islamic regime, wanting to get rid of religious tyranny, gender apartheid, suppression, poverty and corruption are by default Western aspirations and not universal human aspirations. As though the people in Iran and women in Iran cannot distinguish on their own between dictatorship and freedom, discrimination and equality, brutality and respect for humanity. As though if they even were so-called Western values, this would discredit their validity and desirability. According to Fisk, people in Iran are loyal to the "Islamic" revolution. They only want to get rid of Ahmadinezhad.

The Financial Times reporter on GMTV breakfast news adamantly disagreed with my statement that these protests are "the beginning of the end of the Islamic regime." She maintained that people in Iran "do not want a revolution. They want an evolution and a bit more freedom. They want to be able to wear the T-shirts they want."

If I did not believe so firmly in what I want to see happen in my birth country; the one from which I had to flee (like thousands of others) to save my life, to escape torture and execution, at the time of Mr. Mousavi's term as prime minister, I would have thought I was crazy for wanting real change, for wanting the overthrow of this brutal, misogynist, reactionary, religious dictatorship. I would have thought all my beloved comrades and friends who were murdered in the Islamic regime's notorious prisons were crazy for having lost their lives fighting against this regime. I would have thought that these hundreds of thousands of people who risk their lives and venture into street must be crazy.

I am sure Messrs. Mousavi, Karoubi and Khatami do not want much change. They only want a little change. I have no doubt that "they are happy with the Islamic regime." But what about Neda, the young woman who was shot in Tehran? What about that pregnant woman who was killed protesting? What about her partner who lost two loved ones in one shot? What about all those mothers and fathers whose sons and daughters were brutally tortured and executed; those parents who still do not know where their beloved children are buried; those parents who, for fear of reprisal, buried their children in their front gardens. What about the parents of those thousands of children who were made to walk over land mines during the Iraq-Iran war with a key to heaven around their necks? Those children whose mothers were stoned to death? What about the millions of women who are forced to wear the veil and are treated as half humans? Are all these people "happy" with the Islamic republic and only want a little bit of freedom, a bit of change?

If I did not know and feel these grievances so closely, if I had not seen them first hand, if I did not know some of those decent brave young women and men who were executed by this monstrous regime, then I would be convinced. I would have no choice but to accept the only interpretation offered by the international media. It is bewildering. Is this accidental, or is there a hidden agenda? Are these analyses the products of a superficial understanding of a society under the grip of dictatorship and censorship, or are they part of a plan to materialize a make-believe plan and strategy?

We've been there, we've seen that!

I am from the generation that has seen the mass protests against another dictatorship. I am from the generation that fought against the Shah's dictatorship. I have fought against two dictatorships for freedom, equality, socio-economic justice, and prosperity. I am, like so many other comrades, a seasoned political activist. The international media acted the same way 30 years ago. Back then, technology was not so advanced. There was no YouTube, no internet or

satellite television. But people still depended on international media for news. Then, it was the age of short wave radios. People depended on the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Israel and Radio Moscow for information and analysis.

In 1978, these media played an important role in making a leader of Khomeini – who was no more than an exiled clergyman, hardly known by the majority of the population, and almost forgotten by many of his fanatical followers. Then, in the midst of the Cold War, the fear of an increasingly popular leftist movement in Iran, brought the Western states around the table in a summit held in Guadeloupe, to change the course of events of the hitherto largest mass movement in Iranian history. In a short time, to our shock and bewilderment, the Islamists, who were marginalized in the initial phase of the protests, took over the leadership of the anti-monarchist movement.

Saddam Hussein was asked to deport Khomeini, under the pretext of engaging in political activities against the Iranian state. France welcomed him. Overnight, he became an international media celebrity. A “leader” was born. A revolution for freedom, equality and justice was aborted. This was the beginning of 30 years of bloodshed, oppression, misogyny, gender apartheid, stoning, mutilation and a most heinous political system.

History is being repeated. As ever, fearful of radical changes that may lead to empowerment of the left, the opinion-making machinery of the media is telling half of the truth. Their “in-depth analyses” do not even scratch the surface. Maybe on the part of some journalists, the surface is all they are capable of grasping, but overall, there is a deliberate plan to censor the left, not to present the deep aspirations and demands of the people. A “moderate leader” is all they are ready to give voice to.

Balance of power

Are the protesting people only against Ahmadinezhad? Are they really happy with the Islamic regime? Do they really want only a bit of change, a bit of freedom? How do these journalists and political analysts arrive at such assumptions? Let us examine these questions.

This is what has happened in Iran in the past few weeks. In the couple of weeks leading to the election of June 12th, people organised rallies and meetings in support of the two so-called reformist candidates and against Ahmadinezhad. They voted for Mousavi or Karoubi. There was widespread anticipation that the election would be rigged, so the people stayed vigilant and ready to take to streets. When the results were announced only two hours after the clos-

ing of voting polls, massive demonstrations took place. The people rushed into streets in the thousands and protested against the rigged election.

This is how events unfolded. But this is not the whole truth. There is more than meets the eye. While trying to analyse the situation in Iran, one must take into consideration the important factor of balance of power. It is self-evident that people could not go into the streets and shout “down with the Islamic Republic”, while the brutal and sophisticated machinery of suppression was intact. People work within the framework of a balance of power and try to change this balance in their own favour.

Most people’s vote for Mousavi or Karoubi was in fact a “no” vote for Ahmadinezhad and the Islamic Republic. There were only four candidates who passed the vetting system of the Guardian Council. Under the Islamic regime, around 99% of the people are not allowed to stand as candidates. According to Islamic law, a woman cannot become president. This excludes roughly half of the population in one stroke. Godless people not only cannot stand as candidates, they must be beheaded according to the law. Adherents of other religions, except Shi’a, are also excluded. So we are left with male Shi’as. But among the latter group, only those who are true followers of the Islamic Republic may stand as candidates for presidency.

The Guardian Council vets all the prospective candidates and decides who complies with the requirements. In this round, only four men who have been prominent figures in the regime, who had occupied high-ranking posts and played an important role in consolidation of the regime, passed the vetting. The candidates besides Ahmadinezhad were Mousavi, Karoubi and Rezaei. Mousavi was the prime minister at the time of the Iran-Iraq war. Under his term, in August 1988—in less than a month—thousands of opposition activists and even some children were executed in prisons. Karoubi was a prominent figure in the regime from the time of its inception, close to Khomeini and also speaker of the Majlis (Parliament) for some time. Rezaei was the commander of the Islamic Guards Corps (IGC), the main instrument of suppression. These men have all participated in the brutal suppression of the opposition under the Islamic Republic. If the people of Iran ever succeed to bring justice to their society, all these men will stand trial for crime against humanity.

Does this present any real choice to the people? This is the first question that must be asked. If no, then why did people participate in such numbers in the election? People used this opportunity to express their protest, to show their discontent and to say a big “NO” to this regime. The mass rallies that were identified as Mousavi’s or Karoubi’s campaign were a big shock to everyone, including the candidates themselves. In a country where any show of pro-

test, let alone a demonstration, is brutally suppressed, the presidential campaign presented a window of opportunity. The Islamic regime became quite frightened of these mass rallies and the speed with which they grew in numbers and in radicalization.

In the face of this rapid escalation of anti-government rallies under the banner of an election campaign, the IGC issued a communiqué stating that the extremists in the camp of the candidates are trying to overthrow the regime. It threatened the people with hard clamp down if such attempts were to take place. Therefore, the IGC and the Khamenei-Ahmadinezhad camp decided to put an end to the election mood and abort any plans aimed at further weakening of the regime. This led to the election results being announced only couple of hours after the polls closed.

They misread the situation. They failed to recognize the different collective psychology and general mood among the people. They did not see or understand that the times were changing. This time the mood was very different among the people. The people seemed to have become determined not to back down. This was not necessarily a conscious or expressed decision. This mood of defiance was rather the result of a deeper change in the social mood and collective psychology of the people. Iran is at a crossroads. It seems that the situation has reached a point of no return.

The people do not want this regime. They do not want to live under a religious tyranny. They do not want gender apartheid. People want to be free. They want equality and prosperity. This is the will of the people. It seems that this time they are determined to continue their protest until they achieve their demands. The development of events in the past few days, particularly after the Friday sermon by Khamenei, has shifted the power struggle between the people and the regime. Despite heavy clamp down by the security forces, killing around 200 people, injuring many more and imprisoning of hundreds of protesters, despite unleashing security forces and militia thugs on unarmed people, people are defiant. The balance of power has shifted in favour of the people, not in a military sense, but in terms of defying intimidation and fear.

If until Friday, the protesters rallied with their mouth shout, in an attempt not to provoke violence, in the past few days, the protests have become more radical and less restraint. Already the protesters are shouting “down with the Islamic Republic”. The true uncensored feelings are surfacing on the streets. There are news and even video clips of unveiled women in complete non-Islamic clothes in some neighbourhoods. One significant characteristic of this protest movement is that it is not organised or led by those who claim to be its leader, or are iden-

tified by the media as its leader. They have a spontaneous characteristic. What we witness on the streets of not only Tehran, but also some other large cities, looks more like an uprising. It seems that the Islamic regime has entered a phase that whatever tactics it adopts and whatever tones it takes on, it only brings its demise closer. This is the beginning of the end of one of the most brutal, heinous and notorious political regimes of the 20th century. Its demise will have far-reaching effects on the Middle East and political Islam. The women in Iran and indeed the whole region will stand to gain significantly from this course of events.

23 June 2009

People of the world!

We are your neighbours, friends, lovers, colleagues, and comrades.

You know us.

We have lived together and fought together - whether for labour rights, against Sharia, for civil rights, asylum rights, against executions and stonings, against cultural relativism, against faith schools and apostasy laws, for freedom of expression, rationalism and secularism, against political Islam and US militarism.

Today, our revolution - the one we have been preparing and waiting for - has begun in Iran.

We need you to support it full force.

The battle you see unfolding on the streets of Iran is not about the farce of an election, though that is what the western media wants you to think.

Everyone knows that elections in Iran are anything but. In fact, people are taking advantage of the intensified infighting between the regime's factions

to raise their own demands and they - like the rest of us - want the Islamic regime to go.

And it has to go.

Thirty years of medievalism and brutality is enough.

If nothing else, one thing is clear.

The mass movement that is going to bring this regime in Iran to its knees and break the back of the political Islamic movement internationally has begun.

Your support and solidarity will strengthen this revolutionary movement. Come out and condemn the regime and its brutality; exert pressure on western governments to politically isolate the regime. Join us in front of the Islamic regime's embassies across the globe to call for them to be shut down. Call for the prosecution of all those involved in the killings, for the immediate release of all detainees and political prisoners, unconditional freedoms, including for organisation, strike and protest, an end to compulsory veiling, a living wage and an end to sexual apartheid.

Send your messages to the protesting people of Iran to be read on our 24 hour New Channel TV station. Support us and our party, the Worker-communist Party of Iran.

Mark our words; like racial apartheid in the former South Africa, a regime of sexual apartheid can and will be relegated to the dustbins of history.

The future is ours.

Maryam Namazie

Mina Ahadi

Fariborz Pooya

Bahram Soroush

Mahin Alipour

Afsaneh Vahdat

Abe Asadi

Farshad Hussein

Farideh Arman

Karim Shahmohammadi

Fereshteh Moradi

For regular updates on people's protests in Iran, click here:

<http://worker-communistpartyofiran.blogspot.com/>

Iranian Documentary Filmmakers ask Iranian Radio and TV to stop lying about recent events

Rakhshan Banietemad, internationally acclaimed Iranian film maker has appeared in a video posted in YOUTUBE reading the Iranian Documentary Filmmakers statement. Here is the Cinema Without Borders exclusive English translation of this statement:

“We are documentary filmmakers, our job is to discover and show the facts. You can only show the facts by investigation of all aspects of the subject. In regards to the recent events in our country, the national media (Islamic Republic Radio and Television), by hiding the truth about these events, has made it impossible for society to find the facts.

We are documentary filmmakers and we are part of the media; Islamic Republic Radio and Television (Seda Va Simaye Johorie Eslami Iran) is our national media outlet and it belongs to all fractions of the society. Its function should be reflecting the truth of what is happening and allowing for expressions and impressions from different points of view. Therefore, Iranian Radio and Television must not take side with a certain group and ignore the rest of society.

We are documentary filmmakers, we are artists and we are devoted to our art, culture, and language. The news should use a language that guards its own morals and the ethics of the society. Islamic Republic Radio and Television, by distorting and censoring the news, using humiliating language towards the opposition, and making lying routine, is creating a face-off between different groups of our society. We should offer a warning here that denying the people peaceful speech in regards to their expectations will end up in violent acts.

Our people were promoting their own beliefs before Election Day and now, the continuation of what our “National Media Outlet” is doing holds them responsible in any future instances of violence, massacres, civil unrest and human tragedies. Such acts will divide a society into factions that may stand against each other. During the last 30 years, each and every one of our kind has been sharing each other’s sorrow and happiness—they have fought against enemies and given many sacrifices. We have a long history of many thousands of years and we all share this country and its history; do not divide us.”

This statement has been signed by 112 Iranian Documentary Filmmakers.

source: <http://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/>

Pakistan: Protest in Support of Iranian Workers

by PTUDC Quetta Tuesday, 23 June 2009

A rally in support of Iranian workers was organized by the Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign (PTUDC), Unemployed Youth Movement (BNT) and Peoples Students Federation in Quetta on June 21.

<http://www.marxist.com/pakistan-protest-support-iranian-workers.htm>

Los Angeles Times, June 17, 2009

Iran's election opens generational fissure

The split between younger Iranians and their revolutionary or religious elders presents risks to the nation and the reason.

by Ramin Jahanbegloo

Ever since the first days of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there have been two sovereignties in Iran: one divine and one popular.

The popular part of the equation is codified in Iran's Constitution, which calls for the popular election of a president and parliament. Divine sovereignty is believed to derive from God's will, as interpreted by Shiite institutions that bestow power on the faqih, or supreme leader -- currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Increasingly, the divine sovereignty has been less about religion than about political theology. As for the popular sovereignty, it has found its due place in the social work and political action of Iranian civil society. The presence of these two incompatible and conflicting conceptions of sovereignty, authority and legitimacy has always been a bone of contention in Iranian politics, often defining the ideological contours of the political power struggle.

The present crisis in Iran after the presidential election is rooted in the popular quest for the democratization of the state and society, and the conservative reaction and opposition to it. Another factor distinguishing the current political crisis from the previous instances of political factionalism and internal power struggle is a deep-seated ideological structure inherited from the Iranian revolution.

On the one hand, there are those like Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who have been among the architects of the Islamic regime and the challengers for the presidency in Iran, and who believed that the Islamic nomenclature allowed scope for reform and renewal. They find themselves at the head of a pro-democracy and pro-reform movement that continues defying, beyond the results of the presidential election, the very essence of illiberalism and authoritarianism in Iran.

On the other hand, an equally important factor is that most of the demonstrators who have been questioning the legitimacy of Iran's electoral process in the last week are not, unlike their parents, revolutionaries. They belong to a new generation that did not experience the

revolution of 1979 and wants another Iran. Most of them were not around or are too young to remember the revolution, but they made up one-third of eligible voters in the presidential election.

These youngsters are a reminder that a monolithic image of Iran does not necessarily reflect the mind-set of 70% of the population that is under the age of 30. After all, the young Iran's quest for democracy has presented serious challenges not only to the status of the doctrine of the Velayat-e Faqih -- the rule of religious jurists -- but to the reform movement and its democratic authenticity.

One needs also to add that Islamic Iran is more divided than at any time since 1979, a divide between traditionalists and modernists. But in this election, the divide has become deeper than ever between the state and the nation. It also created a gap between those who believe that normal economic and political relations with the West are vital to Iran's future and those who disdain such relations as violations of the Islamic revolution's ideals.

Clearly, the outcome of the 2005 presidential election, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was first elected, was already indicative of an internal crisis at the heart of the Islamic Republic's political framework.

The current conflicts between pro-reform and pro-Ahmadinejad groups after the reelection of Ahmadinejad represent a political struggle between the republican essence of Iran and its clerical oligarchy. The republican gesture pays attention almost exclusively to the legitimacy of the public space, but the clerical establishment refuses to grant any legitimacy to the judgment of the public space.

At moments like this, it should not be forgotten that each time democracy is intimidated, silenced and postponed for another day by a show of force in a country like Iran, it is a loss of credibility for those in charge and a crisis of legitimacy for the entire political system.

Should street violence in Iran escalate, it also spells the possibility of an escalation of violence in the Middle East. This could also complicate international efforts to deal with Iran on issues such as its nuclear program, Iraq's future or Afghanistan. The reelection of Ahmadinejad adds to the fears of the Israelis and Saudis regarding the security of their countries.

President Obama has made it clear on different occasions that he would like to engage Tehran in diplomacy. The U.S. would have hoped for the victory of the reformists. Obama counted on Ahmadinejad's defeat to justify his administration's decision to punt on the nuclear issue.

However, it is highly doubtful that the Iranian unrest will somehow blossom into a flame that burns away Ahmadinejad and his group.

But this is a turning point in Iran's domestic and foreign policies that the world cannot ignore. Letting the genie of democracy out of the bottle in Iran is like opening a Pandora's box that the Iranian regime is clearly fearful it won't be able to close.

Ramin Jahanbegloo, one of Iran's best-known dissidents, headed the contemporary philosophy department of the Cultural Research Center in Tehran until his arrest in April 2006. He was released that August and now lives in exile in Canada, where he teaches at the University of Toronto.

The Guardian, 19 June 2009

I speak for Mousavi. And Iran

The man Iranians want as their leader has been silenced. This is what he wants you to know

by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

I have been given the responsibility of telling the world what is happening in Iran. The office of Mir Hossein Mousavi, who the Iranian people truly want as their leader, has asked me to do so. They have asked me to tell how Mousavi's headquarters was wrecked by plainclothes police officers. To tell how the commanders of the revolutionary guard ordered him to stay silent. To urge people to take to the streets because Mousavi could not do so directly.

The people in the streets don't want a recount of last week's vote. They want it annulled. This is a crucial moment in our history. Since the 1979 revolution Iran has had 80% dictatorship and 20% democracy. We have dictatorship because one person is in charge, the supreme leader – first Khomeini, now Khamenei. He controls the army and the clergy, the justice system and the media, as well as our oil money.

There are some examples of democracy – reformers elected to parliament, and the very fact that a person like Mousavi could stand for election. But, since the day of the election, this element of democracy has vanished. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei announced that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won, and that whoever opposed this will be suppressed – a position he affirmed speaking today in Tehran. People wanted to have demonstrations within the law, but the authorities would not let them. This is the first time we have seen millions on the streets without the permission of the supreme leader.

Now they are gathering to mourn those who have died. The people of Iran have a culture that elevates martyrdom. In the period running up to the revolution, when people were killed at demonstrations, others would gather again in the days following the death. This cycle carried on for six months, and culminated in the revolution. Today they are gathering in Tehran for those who were shot on Tuesday, and if there are more killings, this will continue.

So why do the Iranian people not want Ahmadinejad as their leader? Because he is nothing but a loudspeaker for Khamenei. Under Ahmadinejad, economic problems have grown worse, despite \$280bn of oil revenue. Social and literary freedom is much more restricted than under his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami. The world views us as a terrorist nation on the lookout for war. When Khatami was president of Iran, Bush was president of the US. Now the Americans have Obama and we have our version of Bush. We need an Obama who can find solutions for Iran's problems. Although power would remain in the hands of Khamenei, a president like Mousavi could weaken the supreme leader.

Some suggest the protests will fade because nobody is leading them. All those close to Mousavi have been arrested, and his contact with the outside world has been restricted. People rely on word of mouth, because their mobile phones and the internet have been closed down. That they continue to gather shows they want something more than an election. They want freedom, and if they are not granted it we will be faced with another revolution.

Thirty years ago we supported each other. When police used tear gas, fires would be lit to neutralise its effects. People would set their own cars on fire to save others. Since then, the government has tried to separate people from one other. What we lost was our togetherness, and in the past month we have found that again. All the armed forces in Iran are only enough to repress one city, not the whole country. The people are like drops of water coming together in a sea.

People say that Mousavi won't change anything as he is part of the establishment. That is correct to a degree because they wouldn't let anyone who is not in their circle rise to seniority. But not all members of a family are alike, and for Mousavi it is useful to understand how he has changed over time.

Before the revolution, Mousavi was a religious intellectual and an artist, who supported radical change but did not support the mullahs. After the revolution, when all religious intellectuals and even leftists backed Khomeini, he served as prime minister for eight years. The economy was stable, and he did not order the killings of opponents, or become corrupt.

In order to neutralise his power, the position of prime minister was eliminated from the constitution and he was pushed out of politics. So Mousavi returned to the world of artists because in a country where there are no real political parties, artists can act as a party. The artists supported Khatami and now they support Mousavi.

Previously, he was revolutionary, because everyone inside the system was a revolutionary. But now he's a reformer. Now he knows Gandhi – before he knew only Che Guevara. If we gain power through aggression we would have to keep it through aggression. That is why we're having a green revolution, defined by peace and democracy.

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Telos Press Blog
June 19, 2009

Letter to Khamenei

by Afshin Ellian

To His Excellency Ayatollah Said Ali Khamenei,

A year before the Iranian Revolution, a member of my family had the great privilege of praying beside you. Later, during the revolution, this anecdote became a source of great pride within our family. This relative of mine had prayed with you, and yet he, like me, was forced to go into hiding soon after the revolution.

Excellency, we had not committed any crime. We merely disagreed with the repressive measures instituted by Imam Khomeini, and that had become a punishable offense.

I was not even eighteen years old when I was forced to flee my own country. Against all the hopes of those of us who participated in the Islamic revolution, the revolution enacted a system of political violence that created an unprecedented flood of political refugees and led to the murder of thousands by a regime that claimed to liberate them from tyranny. In the 1980s, thousands of Iranians who fought with you against the Shah were executed, convicted by revolutionary tribunals, without legal representation, with no official charge. Among those killed were two members of my own family. One is buried in a mass grave. In 1988, in the space of a few weeks, thousands of political prisoners were given a summary hearing, slain and thrown into anonymous graves on the orders of Imam Khomeini.

The prisoners were asked three questions: Are you a Muslim? Did you pray this morning? And have you told us everything about your friends, so that we can assume that you will now

adhere to our sharia laws? Thousands of them gave the wrong answer to these questions, and as a result they now lie buried together in a huge mass grave at Khavaran in the desert outside Tehran.

Recently, your president ordered this mass grave to be destroyed. Why did he do that? I suspect it was from fear. Because every day weeping mothers lay flowers on that inglorious pile of earth. Imam Khomeini promised the people Islamic justice. Those mass graves testify to what that means. They are the hallmark of the theocratic regime that you have led for the past twenty years.

Thirty years ago, millions of Iranians, young people mainly, took to the streets to demonstrate for three fundamental rights. First and foremost, the basic freedoms of Azadi-e Baian, Azadi-e Qalam, Azadi-e Andish-e: freedom of speech, freedom to write, and freedom of thought. Second, the right of independence. And third, they demanded the (Islamic) republic.

Against our hopes we helped put a monstrous constitution in place. In the end, Imam Khomeini's doctrine of vilayat-i faqih, rule by a single ayatollah, created an unparalleled crisis for Iran and Islam itself.

Excellency, every response you gave toward non-violent protest has been one of more oppression and more violence. Even in constitutional questions: the appointment of the supreme religious political leader, under the vilayat-i faqih system, has led to insoluble conflict. The periodic presidential elections have had no influence at all on the organization of the judicial system, on foreign policy, or on the government's security policy, and they have thus undermined every form of public credibility and legitimacy. Former president Khatami was eventually forced to concede in public that, despite the high expectations of his supporters, he had been unable to implement any serious reforms. You, as leader of Iran, blocked every presidential measure that you did not accept. As a result, millions of Iranians were disappointed in President Khatami—although it was actually you who was to blame.

The revolution that had begun in freedom, ended in the rule of President Ahmadinejad, with anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. President Ahmadinejad boasted that he would wipe Israel, a member of the United Nations, from the map. Many like me feel a deep shame at this uncivilized and un-Persian anti-Semitism. Iran's semi-official anti-Semitism and tyrannical rule toward its own people reveal the moral failure of the regime that you lead. Millions of people in Tehran and other Iranian cities have condemned this moral bankruptcy by demonstrating and by voting for Mir Housein Mousavi. Your regime is finished. Surely you realize

that too, Excellency? And if you have not realized it yet, then surely you, just like the Shah some thirty years ago, must have heard the hundreds of thousands in Tehran shouting "Al-lahu Akabar, down with the dictatorship!"

Excellency, the demonstrations attest that the people of Iran, the children of the revolution, will accept your rule no more. Your regime is no longer able to exercise sovereignty over the Iranian people without the recourse to violence, extreme violence. I urge you to recognize that Iran is now undeniably at a crossroads: either the will of the people is accepted and a peaceful transition to democracy is achieved, or you plan to respond to these protests by launching a bloodbath, which will cause unprecedented chaos in Iran. Ask yourself: Can a regime that is hated and rejected by a huge majority of the population transform itself into a democratic administration that recognizes the rule of law? Has it ever in history been possible for a political transition to take place peacefully and without the shedding of blood?

The surprising answer is yes, it has been done. The Apartheid regime was also despised by the majority. And that regime was an extremely violent regime. Even so, South Africa chose for a peaceful transition under the brilliant leadership of Nelson Mandela. They negotiated to guarantee the interests (including security and property rights) of the ruling minority. At the same time, they discussed and developed a transitional constitution. This model, called Negotiating Justice, is founded on human rights and the principle of democracy. What happened in South Africa, a country torn apart by hatred and violence, can happen in Iran too.

Excellency, everything depends in the end on the will of the political leader. On you. You may, like De Klerk, the former president of South Africa, decide to create an opportunity for transition; or you may, as you have done in the past, choose to suppress the will of the people with violence. But I urge you to consider that millions of Iranians trust Mousavi. In the latest election, it was not Ahmadinejad but Mousavi who won. He could play the role that Mandela played in the peaceful transition in South Africa. If you give him that chance.

Naturally, people will ask what will happen to those who perpetrated the crimes against humanity, the mass executions that were committed in the name of the Islamic state. Here the precedent set by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provides a possible solution. The will of the people need not end in bloodshed. The United Nations could play a crucial role. The organization has considerable experience in what is known as Transitional Justice. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon should discuss this with the Security Council. Would this be an infringement of Iranian sovereignty? No.

Excellency, even you have your doubts about the declared outcome of that election since you have ordered the poll to be investigated. The mass demonstrations in the cities of Iran show that the desire of the Iranian people is for political transition.

Why should the UN Security Council concern itself with the Iranian question? Because an Iran dominated by violent internal conflict is a threat to regional peace and security and a threat to the people of Iran themselves. Furthermore, without the outcome of this conflict secured, the existence of advanced missiles and enriched radioactive material poses a severe threat to international peace and security. It is up to the United Nations to persuade you, if you fail to realize yourself, that a peaceful transition is possible. In the end it is Iranians, including Iranians living abroad, who must make this change happen.

Excellency Khamenei, you and I know that no tyranny has ever succeeded in creating a political system that lasts. Your advisors have been misinforming you these past years. They have made you deaf and blind to what is really happening. The truth is that the ruling elite is despised by the people. Your puppet Ahmadinejad, who likes to appeal to Iranians in populist terms, is reviled. If you continue to use violence against your people, then you have obviously learned nothing from the tragic fate of the last shah of Persia.

The mothers of the members of my family who were executed will not forgive you. But they will let you withdraw peacefully, for the sake of freedom and the peace of their grandchildren. Time is pressing for the Iranian people, and for the international community. I wish you wisdom and peace,

Yours,

Afshin Ellian

Prof. Dr. Afshin Ellian was born in Tehran. He teaches Philosophy of Law at Leiden University, Netherlands. He has written his PhD thesis on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the role it played in the years of political transition. His article "Monotheism as a Political Problem: Political Islam and the Attack on Religious Equality and Freedom" appeared in *Telos* 145 (Winter 2008).

Le Monde, 19 June 2009

Le régime paye son isolement international, par Azadeh Kian

“Moussavi, récupère nos votes !”, chantent des centaines de milliers d’Iraniens qui, brandissant la couleur verte, symbole, selon Mir Hossein Moussavi, d’un islam rationnel, démocratique et ouvert sur le monde, bravent les interdits et la peur, descendent dans la rue pour défendre leur dignité et revendiquer la restitution de leurs voix confisquées.

Ces hommes et ces femmes, tant celles et ceux qui ont fait la révolution en 1979 que leurs enfants, ont massivement voté à la présidentielle du 12 juin (avec un taux de participation record de 85 %) dans l’espoir de renforcer la composante démocratique et républicaine du régime islamique au détriment de sa composante théocratique de plus en plus militarisée. Parmi ces électeurs épris de liberté qui revendiquent leur droit de citoyen et tentent de sortir leur pays de l’isolement, se trouvent de nombreux intellectuels, étudiants, artistes ou militants des droits de l’homme, qui, déçus du bilan du président Khatami, avaient déserté les urnes depuis 2001.

Aujourd’hui, ils se sentent trahis par le guide Khamenei, qui exprime une rare concordance de vues avec M. Ahmadinejad et qui semble avoir scellé son sort au sien. En acceptant la candidature de Moussavi n’avait-il pas pour but de provoquer la participation de cet électorat contestataire afin de légitimer le régime tout en lui confisquant le vote ? N’a-t-il pas enfreint la Constitution et son propre devoir de superviseur neutre en soutenant le président sortant contre ses rivaux et en écartant l’annulation de cette élection frauduleuse avant même que les résultats soient approuvés par le Conseil de surveillance ?

La mobilisation des électeurs de Moussavi s’explique aussi par les conséquences de la politique populiste menée par le président Ahmadinejad. Ils appartiennent aux groupes sociaux structurés, notamment les classes moyennes, les ouvriers, les commerçants ou les entrepreneurs qui subissent, plus que d’autres, les conséquences d’une monopolisation croissante de l’économie à des fins politiques et clientélistes, d’une inflation importante (entre 27 % et 30 %) conduisant à la perte de leur pouvoir d’achat, d’un taux de chômage élevé (entre 30 % et 50 % des jeunes, selon des estimations) ou de la fuite des capitaux iraniens et étrangers. Ils sont davantage encore fragilisés par les conséquences des sanctions économiques, financières et technologiques décrétées par l’ONU depuis décembre 2006, en réponse aux diatribes lancées par M. Ahmadinejad et les durs du régime sur le dossier du nucléaire, sanctions qui se sont greffées sur celles imposées depuis 1984 par les Etats-Unis.

La campagne électorale et les débats télévisuels entre les candidats ont fourni l’occasion à ses trois rivaux de critiquer le bilan économique négatif d’Ahmadinejad malgré le triplement des revenus pétroliers de l’Etat depuis son élection en 2005 (plus de 75 milliards de dollars par an contre 24 milliards sous Khatami). Nombre d’économistes, dont les deux directeurs

démisionnaires de la Banque centrale d'Iran, sont d'avis qu'Ahmadinejad a ruiné l'Iran. Les importations massives sont faites au détriment des producteurs iraniens, tandis que des milliards de dollars sont investis en Amérique latine et en Afrique au lieu de créer des emplois pour les 800 000 jeunes qui entrent chaque année sur le marché du travail.

A cela s'ajoutent les importantes sommes dépensées pour la reconstruction du Liban sud, alors que d'innombrables Iraniens souffrent du problème de logement, et les centaines de millions de dollars d'aide au Hezbollah libanais ou au Hamas, qui n'ont servi qu'à l'isolement du pays.

Dépourvus d'un véritable programme et d'une réelle assise sociale, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad et son camp, qui veulent en découdre avec les institutions électives, ont scindé la société, dressant les Iraniens les uns contre les autres afin d'imposer leur emprise. Ils ont aussi tenté de se consolider à travers la provocation des tensions régionales et internationales, comme le montre la gestion de la crise du nucléaire ou encore les propos négationnistes et anti-israéliens.

Ces politiques idéologiques et conflictuelles et la militarisation de la politique et de l'économie, qui ont provoqué un front de refus contre l'Iran, ont poussé les conservateurs, ayant leur assise notamment au sein des classes moyennes traditionnelles, des grands commerçants et de la majorité des clercs à l'école théologique de Qom, à revoir leurs alliances avec le président sortant. Seule une minorité d'entre eux a appelé à voter pour lui.

Dès lors, on se pose la question de savoir qui sont ces présumés 62,5 % d'électeurs qui auraient voté pour Ahmadinejad, malgré son bilan économique, culturel ou politique négatif. A travers sa politique populiste et clientéliste, Ahmadinejad a augmenté les dépenses publiques et a épuisé des réserves financières accumulées sous la présidence de Khatami. Il redistribue certes une partie des revenus pétroliers aux classes déstructurées et défavorisées, afin de contenir leur mécontentement et d'orienter leur vote, et recrute leurs jeunes chômeurs pour les milices.

Mais même avec les pasdarans (dont le nombre est estimé à environ 120 000) et leur famille, on est encore très loin des résultats annoncés par le ministère de l'intérieur, dirigé par Mahsouli, un milliardaire proche d'Ahmadinejad.

La contestation de cette élection entachée de fraudes et d'irrégularités sans précédent et le refus du Guide d'annuler ses résultats ont provoqué une crise politique profonde des institutions, déplaçant le champ politique dans la rue. Malgré la répression et les arrestations massives, c'est désormais la mobilisation des contestataires qui déterminera les rapports de force entre les factions au pouvoir.

Les traditions chiïtes de commémoration des martyrs de la répression aidant, la mobilisation semble pouvoir tenir, surtout avec l'appui de l'opinion publique occidentale et internationale. Si dans son bras de fer avec les meneurs du coup d'État, Moussavi, ancien premier ministre et proche de l'ayatollah Khomeiny, ne parvient pas à "récupérer les votes de ses électeurs", la légitimité de l'ensemble du régime sera en jeu trente ans après son avènement. Mais la fin de l'exception iranienne semble ne pas être pour bientôt.

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Middle East Report Online, June 8, 2009

An Artist as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Shiva Balaghi

(Shiva Balaghi is an editor of Middle East Report. Beginning July 2009, she will be a fellow at the Cogut Center for Humanities at Brown University. She would like to thank David Colosi of the Grey Art Gallery for his assistance on this article.)

In the 1960s, Mir Hossein Mousavi wrote that it was an artist's responsibility to help envision an alternative future for society. As the President of Iran, would he deliver on that promise?

Something's happening here. In one of the largest street demonstrations in Tehran since the 1979 Revolution, thousands filled Vali Asr Street (formerly known as Pahlavi Street) on Monday, forming a human chain nearly 12 miles long and stopping traffic for nearly five hours.

They wore strips of green cloth around their wrists and heads in support of presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. They sang "Ey Iran," the unofficial national anthem composed in the Pahlavi era by one of the leading figures of classical Persian music, the late Ruhollah Khaleghi. Banned for a time by the Islamic Republic, the song's lyrical melody touches a deeply patriotic vein.

Oh Iran, oh bejeweled land,
On your soil lies the wellspring of the arts...
Never far from you are my thoughts.
In your cause, what value do our lives have?
May the land of Iran be eternal.

Some of Iran's leading intellectuals and cultural figures have been actively campaigning for Mousavi. They attended a May rally in Azadi Stadium, marking the anniversary of the 1997

election of President Khatami. The Oscar-nominated director Majid Majidi made Mousavi's official campaign video. Over 800 filmmakers and actors signed a public letter published in Iranian newspapers supporting Mousavi's candidacy. Leading directors like Dariush Mehrjui, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Manijeh Hekmat, and Masoud Kimiai appeared in a ten-minute video, "Green Stars," distributed on YouTube, calling on Iranians to vote -- and to vote for Mousavi. "There will be a day when Iran has a president whose hands are draped in green," says a young woman to the camera, "who paints, listens to music, and reads quality books. His name is Mir Hossein Mousavi." Makhmalbaf reminds viewers that disenfranchised voters who protested the last presidential elections by not voting far outnumbered those who voted for Ahmadinejad. "An artist understands the meaning of responsibility," says the director Masoud Kimiai. An architect and an artist himself, Mousavi has garnered increasing support amongst Iran's culture workers who have faced growing pressures in Ahmadinejad's regime.

"Never have I found those who pursue art and culture so demeaned," says one participant in the video "Green Stars." The western media has largely overlooked this important aspect of the June 12 elections for the Iranian presidency. In the past four years, the red lines that confine artistic production in Iran have blurred and sharpened intermittently, inhibiting Iranian visual and literary cultural life. Director Tahmineh Milani's latest film, "Settlement," has been banned. The books of Sadeq Hedayat, perhaps Iran's most eminent fiction writer who died in 1951, can no longer be published. The translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's latest novel never saw the light of day. Many writers and filmmakers simply don't get permits to publish and distribute their work. Responding to the growing criticism, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Safar Harandi has urged more self-censorship. Iranian artists have at times been targeted as "spies" for western powers, and it has become increasingly difficult for Iranian-American and western artists and art scholars to interact with their Iranian counterparts.

Meanwhile, the deterioration of Iran's foreign relations under President Ahmadinejad has hampered the cultural diplomacy initiatives undertaken by his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami. At the time, Iran experienced a cultural opening some dubbed Iran's "glasnost." One of Iran's leading museums, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) hosted exhibitions co-organized with European cultural organizations, like a Gerhard Richter show and an exhibition of twentieth century British sculpture that included works by Damien Hirst and Mona Hatoum. TMOCA organized acclaimed exhibitions of contemporary Iranian art, curated by such leading figures as Faryar Javaherian, which included works by Iranian exiled artists like Shirin Neshat and Siah Armajani. In 2003, TMOCA hosted a major retrospective

of Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture; the work of Iran's preeminent sculptor had not been widely shown in Iran since 1979. TMOCA regularly hosted symposia that included western art critics and scholars. In his last exhibition after the election of President Ahmadinejad, Dr. Sami Azar, the outgoing director of the museum, mounted a major show of TMOCA's western contemporary art, the largest collection of its kind held outside of Europe and the United States. As Ahmadinejad took over the presidency, thousands of Iranians passed through the museum each day looking at paintings by Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon, and Jackson Pollock.

An Artist as Mr. President?

G1975.103 Mousavi (Khameneh) Mir-Hossein.jpg

Figure 1, Musical Notations (1967), courtesy Grey Art Gallery, NYU

Some of the optimism conveyed by Iran's culture workers at the prospect of a Mousavi presidency is clearly based on his background as a respected architect and painter. In the 1960s, Mir Hossein Mousavi studied at one of Iran's top architecture departments at the Melli University. Well versed in eastern philosophies and theories of western modern art, his early paintings were abstract expressionist works. In the 1960s and '70s, his architectural drawings and paintings were regularly exhibited in Ghandriz Gallery, known for promoting young contemporary artists, especially those experimenting with abstract expressionism. He used oil and gouache combined with mixed media to produce simple yet beautiful paintings.

In a pamphlet produced for a February 1968 exhibition of his art at Ghandriz Gallery, Mousavi wrote a rather philosophical essay on art and society. Art, he wrote, can never replace social movements and "the paint brush will never take the place of the communal struggle for freedom. It must be said that the expressive work of any painter or artist will not minimize the need to perform his social responsibilities. Yet it is within the scope of these responsibilities that his art can provide a vision for a way of living in an alternative future."

By 1979, Mousavi was one of the leaders of the Islamic Republic Party. Soon after the revolution, he became the editor of the party's chief newspaper, *Jumhuriy-eh Islami*. Not long after the nascent revolutionary government took over TMOCA, his newspaper published a scathing critique of an exhibition of works by the artist Nicky Nodjoumi in which a particular understanding of the relationship between art and society was articulated. The ultimate aim of any artist, the newspaper declared, must be to encourage people to strive to seek spiritual values. The artist must produce a pure art unburdened with concerns of race, tribalism, class and political parties. Such an art is the ink, the lifeblood of the revolution -- and can help the

people reach for the divine, seek righteous values and nurture positive cultural investments in society.

G1975.531 Mousavi (Khameneh), Mir-Hossein.jpg

Figure 2 , The Queen's Park (1972), courtesy Grey Art Gallery, NYU

In the fall of 1981, Mousavi became the prime minister of Iran, a position he held until 1989 when it was constitutionally dissolved. He is remembered fondly for having helped lead the country through the treacherous Iran-Iraq War, creating a ration system that allowed a fair distribution of basic goods for Iranians facing the double impact of the war and an international sanctions regime. It was also during the war that Iran undertook "The Sacred Defense," the mobilization of the home front that drew heavily on cultural production -- films, television serials, wall art and posters, painting and literature -- to create support for the long and painful war that devastated so many Iranians' lives. It is unclear what role the artist-as-prime minister had in shaping that official cultural narrative which, throughout the 1980s, largely supplanted alternative artistic visions.

Mousavi left political office in August 1989, but he did not leave the government. As he told the Financial Times in April of this year, "I was interested in culture, which is why I shifted to cultural activities. Of course during this period I was [an] advisor to the top authorities. I have also been a member of the High Council for Cultural Revolution and the Expediency Council. The positions necessitated that I follow political and executive issues." [i] The genesis of the Cultural Revolution goes back to the campus wars between various student groups during and immediately following the 1979 Revolution. By 1980, the Islamic student groups had the official backing of the Ayatollah Khomeini who appointed the original members of the High Council for Cultural Revolution; their chief objective was the Islamization of Iran's universities. By 1996, the nature of the organization shifted. According to its website, "In this stage the Council was entrusted with responsibility to give priority to the cultural management of the society in various arenas and through appropriate policy making pave the way for emergence of a society benefited from Divine [sic] blessings." [ii]

Mir-Hossein Mousavi is also the head of the Iranian Academy of the Arts, created by the High Council of the Cultural Revolution in 1998. According to the statutes of the Academy, its purpose is to carry out policies and implement strategies to safeguard and promote Islamic and national art and cultural heritage and to "confront the threats of the invading culture." The activities of the academy are broad, its organizational structure expansive, and its accomplishments noteworthy. It has various departments including those dedicated to the tradi-

tional arts, cinema, music, philosophy and architecture. It also supports research groups on topics like the Anthropology of Art, and serves as a clearing house for scholars of Iranian culture from around the world. It publishes books and journals on various aspects of Iranian culture. The academy oversees several cultural organizations such as Saba Cultural and Artistic Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Palestine. It also organizes major international exhibitions of contemporary Islamic art.

Reading Tea Leaves: What Will Become of Iranian Cultural Life in a Mousavi Presidency?

Taking account of Mousavi's art, his writings on art, and his work as a leading art administrator, there is reason to be hopeful that we would witness another Iranian glasnost during his presidency. Though he was a member of the Cultural Revolution's council, which hardly bodes well for those invested in artistic and intellectual freedoms, he has by some accounts taken a very passive role in recent years. Certainly, his fiery denunciations of Ahmadinejad suggest there will be a break from the status quo.

His wife, Dr. Zahra Rahnavard, is also an artist, holding bachelors and masters degrees in Art from Tehran University. Her works have been incorporated into public spaces in Tehran. In an interview with PBS while she was still the Chancellor of Al-Zahra University and an advisor to President Khatami, she explained, "Because of my artistic character I can approach politics in a more poetic and free way." Describing her home life, which has received considerable attention in the presidential campaign, she said, "The atmosphere in our family is very complex – art, religion, politics, sports and happiness co-exist." [iii] Perhaps those thousands campaigning so vigorously and hopefully for her husband are hoping that this same atmosphere can be expanded to encompass all of Iran, "oh bejeweled land."

Endnotes

[1] "FT Interview: Mir-Hossein Moussavi," April 13, 2009, www.ft.com. Mousavi has been a member of the Expediency Council that serves mainly as an advisory role for the Supreme Leader since 1997.

[2] Secretariat of Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, <http://www.iranculture.org/en/about/tarikh.php>

[3] Rahnavard was featured in the series "Adventure Divas," <http://www.adventuredivas.com/divas/iran/zahra-rahnavard/>

Middle East Report, Spring 2009

Why the Islamic Republic Has Survived

Ervand Abrahamian

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A mullah in his car on February 11, 1979, day of the victory of the revolution. (Abbas/Magnum Photos)

Obituaries for the Islamic Republic of Iran appeared even before it was born. In the hectic months of 1979—before the Islamic Republic had been officially declared—many Iranians as well as foreigners, academics as well as journalists, participants as well as observers, conservatives as well as revolutionaries, confidently predicted its imminent demise. Taking every street protest, every labor strike, every provincial clash as the harbinger of its inevitable downfall, they gave the new regime a few months—at best, a few short years.

Such predictions were understandable. After all, Iran—not to mention world history—had produced few full-fledged theocracies. Regimes often taken to be theocracies turn out, upon closer examination, to have been no such thing. Cromwell’s England was controlled by generals and landed gentry. It was princes, rather than preachers, who ruled the Lutheran kingdoms. Even Calvin’s Geneva, one of the first totalitarian states, was managed by lay lawyers rather than seminarians. What is more, few in 1979 could contemplate the possibility that seminary-trained clerics could administer a country that had experienced a half-century of modern development and was home to hundreds of thousands of engineers, doctors, scientists, civil servants, teachers and industrial workers. How could “mullahs” steeped in esoteric medieval writings deal with the formidable problems of the twentieth century? One did not have to be a Trotskyite in 1979 to think that the downfall of the Shah would inevitably and quickly pave the way for a more profound Permanent Revolution.

Despite the prognostications, the Islamic Republic has not only survived three full decades but in recent years has been hyped as a major Middle Eastern power that threatens its neighbors as well as the world’s sole superpower. It is often depicted in the United States as a cross between the Sassanid Empire and the Third Reich, between the early caliphate and the Soviet Union. Leaving aside the geopolitical reasons why a Third World state with a fourth-rate mili-

tary has such a puffed-up image, the question worth asking is: What accounts for the 30-year survival of the Islamic Republic?

Four answers come readily to mind. None, however, bears scrutiny. The first is that the clerical regime has unleashed reigns of terror. It is true that the Islamic Republic has at times used violence: in 1979, immediately after the revolution, when it executed 757—many of them members of the Shah’s regime; in 1981–1985, when it crushed an uprising of the quasi-Marxist Mojahedin-e Khalq by executing 12,500; and in 1988, immediately after the eight-year war with Iraq, when it hanged another 2,000 prisoners—most of them, again, Mojahedin. But this bloodletting, grotesque as it is, pales in comparison to the violence attending other major revolutions—especially those of England, France, Mexico, Russia and China. It also pales in comparison to the carnage of right-wing counter-revolutions such as those in Indonesia, Central America and even France in 1848 and 1870. And violence took its toll on the regime as well. In 1981–1982, the Mojahedin assassinated some 2,000 members of the regime, including a president, a prime minister and Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, eminence grise of the clerical leadership, as well as a number of cabinet ministers, parliamentary deputies, judges, Friday prayer leaders and officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Violence, on the whole, has weakened rather than strengthened the Islamic Republic.

A grave at Behesht-e Zahra, martyrs’ cemetery of the Iran-Iraq war. (Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum Photos)

The second reason often given for the survival of the Islamic Republic is the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). It is true that the initial Iraqi invasion rallied the nation behind the government. But the continuation of the fighting across the Iraqi border in May 1983, under the banners “war, war until victory” and “the road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad,” did much to damage the Islamic Republic. Most of the damage suffered by Iran in terms of human lives, urban destruction and financial drain came in these last five years of fighting, and in 1988 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had to accept terms he had been offered as early as May 1983. The regime calls the fighting the Imposed War, but it was imposed upon Iran in more ways than one.

The third commonly cited explanation is oil revenue. It is true that oil money lubricates the machinery of government in Iran, as it does in neighboring “rentier states.” But oil revenues are neither an unmitigated “curse” nor a *deus ex machina* lying behind the rise and fall of all regimes and sundry. After all, oil did not guarantee the survival of the Shah. And since 1979, the Islamic Republic has suffered from highly erratic fluctuations in the international price of

oil. After reaching \$39 per barrel in 1981, oil prices fell to a new low of \$9 in 1986, hovered below \$20 for much of the late 1980s, climbed to \$32 in 1991 and fell again to less than \$10 in 1999. Oil prices did not boom again until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The last 30 years have seen as many years of famine as of feast.

The fourth reason adduced for both the Islamic Revolution and the durability of the Islamic Republic is Shi'ism. It is true that one cannot analyze the mass demonstrations of 1978 without taking religion into account. Witness the potent slogan, "Make every place Karbala', every month Muharram, every day Ashoura." But if Shi'ism is the real answer, then we are faced with the question of why Iran—which has been majority-Shi'i since 1500—did not produce the Islamic Revolution until 1979. For most of these 470 years, Shi'ism had been considered, at best, apolitical and quietist and, at worst, conservative and reactionary. No historian can buy the official explanation that imperialism, monarchism and Zionism had for centuries distorted Shi'ism, and that the world had to await the arrival of Khomeini to unveil the true revolutionary nature of Islam. The idea that the republic has survived because it is Islamic is a tautology.

If these stock explanations do not suffice, then what does? The real answer lies not in religion, but in economic and social populism. By the early 1970s, Iran had produced a generation of radical intelligentsia that was revolutionary not only in its politics—wanting to replace the monarchy with a republic—but in its economic and social outlook. It wanted to transform the class structure root and branch. The trailblazer was a young intellectual named Ali Shariati, who did not live to see the revolution but whose teachings fueled the revolutionary movement. Inspired by the Algerians, Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, Shariati spent his short life reinterpreting Shi'ism as a revolutionary ideology and synthesizing it with Marxism. He produced what can be termed a Shi'i version of Catholic liberation theology. His teachings struck a chord not just among college and high school students, but also among younger seminary students. These budding theologians could easily accept his teachings (except his occasional anti-clericalism). One theology student went so far as to describe Imam Husayn as an early Che Guevara and Karbala' as the Sierra Madre. Most of those who organized demonstrations and confrontations in the streets and bazaars during the turbulent months of 1978 were college and high school students inspired mainly by Shariati. His catch phrases—which had more in common with Third World populism than with conventional Shi'ism—found their way, sometimes via Khomeini, into slogans and banners displayed throughout the revolution. Typical of them were:

Our enemy is imperialism, capitalism and feudalism!

Islam belongs to the oppressed, not the oppressors!
Oppressed of the world unite!
Islam is not the opiate of the people!
Islam is for equality and social justice!
Islam represents the slum dwellers, not the palace dwellers!
Islam will eliminate class differences!
Islam comes from the masses, not the rich!
Islam will eliminate landlessness!
We are for Islam, not for capitalism and feudalism!
Islam will free the hungry from the clutches of the rich!
The poor fought for the Prophet, the rich fought against him!
The poor die for the revolution, the rich plot against it!
Independence, freedom, Islamic Republic!
Freedom, equality, Islamic Republic!

This populism helps explain not only the success of the revolution but also the continued survival of the Islamic Republic. The Republic's constitution—with 175 clauses—transformed these general aspirations into specific inscribed promises. It pledged to eliminate poverty, illiteracy, slums and unemployment. It also vowed to provide the population with free education, accessible medical care, decent housing, pensions, disability pay and unemployment insurance. "The government," the constitution declared, "has a legal obligation to provide the aforementioned services to every individual in the country." In short, the Islamic Republic promised to create a full-fledged welfare state—in its proper European, rather than derogatory American, sense.

Election workers put up posters of Rafsanjani in downtown Tehran, June 2005. (Kai Wiedenhofer)

In the three decades since the revolution, the Islamic Republic—despite its poor image abroad—has taken significant steps toward fulfilling these promises. It has done so by giving priority to social rather than military expenditures, and thus dramatically expanding the Ministries of Education, Health, Agriculture, Labor, Housing, Welfare and Social Security. The military consumed as much as 18 percent of the gross domestic product in the last years of the shah. Now it takes up as little as 4 percent. The Ministry of Industries has also grown in most part because in 1979–1980 the state took over numerous large factories whose owners had absconded abroad. The alternative would have been to close them down and create mass unemployment. Since most of these factories had functioned only because of subsidies from the old regime, the new regime had no choice but to continue subsidizing them.

In three decades the regime has come close to eliminating illiteracy among the post-revolutionary generations, reducing the overall rate from 53 percent to 15 percent.[1] The rate among women has fallen from 65 percent to 20 percent. The state has increased the number of students enrolled in primary schools from 4,768,000 to 5,700,000, in secondary schools from 2.1 million to over 7.6 million, in technical schools from 201,000 to 509,000, and in universities from 154,000 to over 1.5 million. The percentage of women in university student populations has gone up from 30 percent to 62 percent. Thanks to medical clinics, life expectancy at birth has increased from 56 to 70, and infant mortality has decreased from 104 to 25 per 1,000. Also thanks to medical clinics, the birth rate has fallen from an all-time high of 3.2 to 2.1, and the fertility rate—the average number of children born to a woman in her lifetime—from 7 to 3. It is expected to fall further to 2 by 2012—in other words, Iran in the near future will achieve near zero population growth.

The Islamic Republic has bridged the chasm between urban and rural life in part by raising the prices of agricultural goods relative to other commodities and in part by introducing schools, medical clinics, roads, electricity and piped water into the countryside. For the first time ever, villagers can afford consumer goods, even motorbikes and pickup trucks. According to one economist who, on the whole, is critical of the regime, 80 percent of rural households own refrigerators, 77 percent televisions and 76 percent gas stoves.[2] Some 220,000 peasant families, moreover, have received 850,000 hectares of land confiscated from the old elite. They, together with the some 660,000 families who had obtained land under the earlier White Revolution, form a substantial rural class that has benefited not only from these new social services but also from state-subsidized cooperatives and protective tariff walls. This class provides the regime with a rural social base.

The regime has also tackled problems of the urban poor. It has replaced slums with low-income housing, beautified the worst districts and extended electricity, water and sewage lines to working-class districts. As an American journalist highly critical of the regime's economic policies admits, "Iran has become a modern country with few visible signs of squalor." [3] What is more, it has supplemented the income of the underclass—both rural and urban—by generously subsidizing bread, fuel, gas, heat, electricity, medicines and public transport. The regime may not have eradicated poverty nor appreciatively narrowed the gap between rich and poor but it has provided the underclass with a safety net. In the words of the same independent-minded economist, "Poverty has declined to an enviable level for middle-income developing countries." [4]

In addition to substantially expanding the central ministries, the Islamic Republic has also set up numerous semi-independent institutions, such as the Mostazafin (Oppressed), Martyrs', Housing, Alavi and Imam Khomeini Relief Foundations. Headed by clerics or other persons appointed by and loyal to the Supreme Leader, these foundations together account for as much as 15 percent of the national economy and control budgets that total as much as half that of the central government. Much of their assets are businesses confiscated from the former elite. The largest of them, the Mostazafin Foundation, administers 140 factories, 120 mines, 470 agribusinesses, 100 construction companies and innumerable rural cooperatives. It also owns the country's two leading newspapers, Ettelaat and Keyhan. According to the Guardian, in 1993 the foundation employed 65,000 and had an annual budget of over \$10 billion. [5] Some of these foundations also lobby effectively to protect university quotas for war veterans and together they provide hundreds of thousands with wages and benefits, including pensions, housing and health insurance. In other words, they are small welfare states within the larger welfare state.

The important role the welfare state plays makes these expenditures the third rail of Iranian politics. Few politicians—whether conservative or liberal, reformist or fundamentalist, radical or moderate, pro-business or pro-labor—are foolhardy enough to take advice from Chicago School economists inside and outside the country who denounce the “moral hazards” of big government and instead wax ecstatic over the “virtues” of free markets, privatization, small government, business competition, cost-effectiveness, efficiency, entrepreneurship, globalization and entry into the World Trade Organization. In fact, most politicians since the revolution have subscribed to varying degrees to economic populism. Some, such as former Presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, were muted populists shy about tampering with social programs. Others, such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are out-and-out populists promising to “bring the oil money to peoples' dining room tables” by further expanding social programs. No realist would contemplate drastic cuts in the safety net, though there are limits to the populism: Ahmadinejad, for instance, placed a quota on subsidized gasoline.

Upcoming decades will test the regime's ability to juggle the competing demands of these populist programs with those of the educated middle class—especially the ever expanding army of university graduates produced, ironically, by one of the revolution's main achievements. This new stratum needs not only jobs and a decent standard of living but also greater social mobility and access to the outside world—with all its dangers, especially to well-protected home industries—and, concomitantly, the creation of a viable civil society. The re-

gime may be able to meet these formidable demands if it finds fresh sources of oil and gas revenues—but to do so it will need to markedly improve its relations with Washington so that economic sanctions can be lifted. Without the lifting of sanctions, Iran cannot gain access to the technology and capital needed to develop its large gas reserves. If new revenues do not materialize, class politics will threaten to rear its head again. For 30 years, populism has managed to blunt the sharp edge of class politics. It may not do so in the future.

Endnotes

[1] Most of these statistics have been taken from government reports. For updated summaries of these reports, see Middle East Institute, *The Iranian Revolution at 30* (Washington, DC, 2009).

[2] Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Poverty and Inequality Since the Revolution,” *The Iranian Revolution at 30* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2009), p. 107.

[3] Laura Secor, “The Rationalist,” *New Yorker*, February 2, 2009.

[4] Salehi-Isfahani, p. 105.

[5] *Guardian*, July 9, 1993.

Bloggingheads TV discussion on Iran.

Between Reza Aslan, an Iranian-American writer and Middle East analyst, and Eli Lake, a national security correspondent for the *Washington Times*

<http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/20520?in=00:00&out=59:43>

<http://iran2009election.opinionware.net/>

Global Electronic Sit-in In Solidarity with Iranians Protesting against the Rigged 2009 Presidential Elections - 18 JUNE 2009 - ongoing until further notice

Please join us in this urgent action in solidarity with the large numbers of Iranian people who have been taking to the streets since June 13, 2009 to claim their right to free and fair elections. This electronic sit-in targets the websites of the Guardian Council, the Interior Ministry, the Presidency of Iran, Ali Khamenei, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. How it works?

Our demands:

* Ahmadinejad must resign immediately.

* All political prisoners, including all of the people who have been arrested on political charges in the past several days must be immediately released.

* A new and independently monitored election must be held.

* The list of presidential candidates must be open and free of interference by the Guardian Council.

Action ongoing until further notice. Launch this action as often as you can and leave it open as long as you can. You may work in other windows while you leave the action window open.

NOTE: In the action page, error messages such as Page Not Found and Service Unavailable are expected and show that the action is reaching their server.

enter the action ----- mirror site (what is it?) ~~~~~ download 12k zip (what is it?)

This action is NOT in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi or other presidential candidates in the 12 June 2009 election. The race for presidential candidacy was itself fundamentally flawed. The Guardian Council, a clerical body overseeing the governance of Iran, rejected 90% of eligible candidates the right to run in the election, leaving only 4 candidates on the list, all of whom are connected to one or other of the factions of the ruling theocracy and should equally be held accountable for the atrocities committed against Iranians over the past 30 years and for the countless social and economic ills that are inflicting the country.

This action is in solidarity with hundreds of thousands of Iranians from diverse social groups and classes who, since Saturday, 13 June 2009, have been defying the official ban on mass rally and taken to the streets in many cities across Iran to voice their anger at seeing their right as citizens to have their votes counted trampled upon in a rigged election.

Sirens of Solidarity

latest news --> iran rigged election (twitter, compiled outside iran) | iran elect (twitter, from iran) | 7rooz blog (outside iran)

Action organized by Sirens of Solidarity in collaboration with OpinionWare. Code courtesy of Electronic Disturbance Theatre. Contact: sosiranvigil [at] gmail [dot] com

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The Daily Cartoon 20th June 2006

http://www.independent.co.uk/multimedia/archive/00191/cartoon200609_1916418.jpg

The Independent,
20 June 2009

Robert Fisk's World: In Tehran, fantasy and reality make uneasy bedfellows

It's said that the cruel 'Iranian' cops aren't Iranian at all. They're Hizbollah militia

At around 4.35 last Monday morning, my Beirut mobile phone rang in my Tehran hotel room. "Mr Fisk, I am a computer science student in Lebanon. I have just heard that students are being massacred in their dorms at Tehran University. Do you know about this?" The Fisk notebook is lifted wearily from the bedside table. "And can you tell me why," he continued, "the BBC and other media are not reporting that the Iranian authorities have closed down SMS calls and local mobile phones and have shut down the internet in Tehran? I am learning what is happening only from Twitters and Facebook."

When I arrived at the university, the students were shrieking abuse through the iron gates of the campus. "Massacre, massacre," they cried. Gunfire in the dorms. Correct. Blood on the floor. Correct. Seven dead? Ten dead, one student told me through the fence. We don't know. The cops arrived minutes later amid a shower of stones. Filtering truth out of Tehran these days is as frustrating as it is dangerous.

A day earlier, an Iranian woman muttered to me in an office lift that the first fatality of the street violence was a young student. Was she sure, I asked? "Yes," she said. "I have seen the photograph of his body. It is terrible." I never saw her again. Nor the photograph. Nor had anyone seen the body. It was a fantasy. Earnest reporters check this out – in fact, I have been spending at least a third of my working days in Tehran this past week not reporting what might prove to be true but disproving what is clearly untrue.

Take the call I had five hours before the early-hour phone call, from a radio station in California. Could I describe the street fighting I was witnessing at that moment? Now, it happened that I was standing on the roof of the al-Jazeera office in north Tehran, speaking in a late-night live interview with the Qatar television station. I could indeed describe the scene to California. What I could see were teenagers on motorcycles, whooping with delight as they set light to the contents of a litter bin on the corner of the highway.

Two policemen ran up to them with night-sticks and they raced away on their bikes with shouts of derision. Then the Tehran fire brigade turned up to put out – as one of the firemen

later told me with infinite exhaustion – their 79th litter-bin fire of the night. I knew how he felt. A report that Basiji militia had taken over one of Mir-Hossein Mousavi's main election campaign office was a classic. Yes, there were uniformed men in the building – belonging to Mousavi's own hired security company.

Now for the very latest on the fantasy circuit. The cruel "Iranian" cops aren't Iranian at all. They are members of Lebanon's Hizbollah militia. I've had this one from two reporters, three phone callers (one from Lebanon) and a British politician. I've tried to talk to the cops. They cannot understand Arabic. They don't even look like Arabs, let alone Lebanese. The reality is that many of these street thugs have been brought in from Baluch areas and Zabol province, close to the Afghan border. Even more are Iranian Azeris. Their accents sound as strange to Tehranis as would a Belfast accent to a Cornishman hearing it for the first time.

Fantasy and reality make uneasy bedfellows, but once they are combined and spread with high-speed inaccuracy around the world, they are also lethal. Sham elections, the takeover of party offices, a massacre on a university campus, an imminent coup d'état, the possible overthrow of the whole 30-year old Islamic Republic, the isolation of an entire country as its communications are systematically shut down.

I am reminded of Eisenhower's comment to Foster Dulles when he sent him to London to close down Anthony Eden's crazed war in Suez. The secretary of state's job, Eisenhower instructed Dulles, was to say "Whoah, boy!" Good advice for those who believe in the Twitterers.

But the no-smoke-without-fire brigade has a point. Look at the extraordinary, million-strong march against the regime by Mousavi's supporters on Monday. Even the Iranian press was forced to report it, albeit on inside pages. Yes, the authorities have indeed closed down the local SMS service. Yes, they have slowed down – but not closed – the internet. My Beirut roaming phone now rarely reaches London, although incoming calls arrive – unfortunately for me – round the clock. The Iranian government is obviously trying to interfere with the communications of Mousavi supporters to prevent them from organising further marches. Outrageous in any normal country, perhaps. But this is not a normal country. It is a state as obsessed with the dangers of counter-revolution as the West is obsessed with Iran's nuclear ambitions. The Supreme Leader's speech yesterday was proof of that.

But then we had the famous instruction to journalists in Tehran from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance that they could no longer report opposition street demonstrations. I heard nothing of this. Indeed, the first clue came when I refused to be interviewed by CNN (because their

coverage of the Middle East is so biased) and the woman calling me asked: "Why? Are you worried about your safety?" Fisk continued to spend 12 hours a day on the streets. I discovered there was a ban only when I read about it in *The Independent*. Maybe the Guidance lads and lassies couldn't get through on my mobile. But then, who had cut the phone lines?

We have, in fact, reported all the censorship – of local newspapers as well as communications. The footage of a brutal police force assaulting the political opposition on the streets of the capital has shocked the world. Rightly so, although no one has made comparison with police forces who batter demonstrators on the streets of Western Europe, who beat women with night-sticks, who have kicked over an innocent middle-aged man who immediately suffered a fatal heart attack, who have shot down an innocent passenger on the London Tube... There are special codes of morality to be applied to Middle East countries which definitely must not apply to us.

So let's take a look at those Iranian elections. A fraud, we believe. And I have the darkest doubts about those election figures which gave Mousavi a paltry 33.75 per cent of the vote. Indeed, I and a few Iranian friends calculated that if the government's polling-night statistics were correct, the Iranian election committee would have had to have counted five million votes in just two hours. But our coverage of this poll has been deeply flawed. Most visiting Western journalists stay in hotels in the wealthy, north Tehran suburbs, where tens of thousands of Mousavi supporters live, where it's easy to find educated translators who love Mousavi, where interviewees speak fluent English and readily denounce the spiritual and cultural and social stagnation of Iran's – let us speak frankly – semi-dictatorship.

But few news organisations have the facilities or the time or the money to travel around this 659,278 square-mile country – seven times the size of Britain – and interview even the tiniest fraction of its 71 million people. When I visited the slums of south Tehran on Friday, for example, I found that the number of Ahmadinejad supporters grew as Mousavi's support dribbled away. And I wondered whether, across the huge cities and vast deserts of Iran, a similar phenomenon might be discovered. A Channel 4 television crew, to its great credit, went down to Isfahan and the villages around that beautiful city and came back with a suspicion – unprovable, of course, anecdotal, but real – that Ahmadinejad just might have won the election.

This is also my suspicion: that Ahmadinejad might have scraped in, but not with the huge majority he was awarded. For with their usual, clumsy, autocratic behaviour, the clerics behind the Islamic Republic may have decreed that only a greater majority for the winner could decisively annihilate the reputation of its secular opponents. Perhaps Ahmadinejad got 51 per cent

or 52 per cent and this was preposterously increased to 63 per cent. Perhaps Mousavi picked up 44 per cent or 45 per cent. I don't know. The Iranians will never know, even though the Supreme Leader told us yesterday that the incredible 63 per cent was credible. That is Iran's tragedy.

Yes, Ahmadinejad remains for me an outrageous president, one of those cracked political leaders – like Colonel Ghaddafi or Lebanon's General Michel Aoun – which this region sadly throws up, to the curses of its friends and to the delight of its enemies in the West. And the Islamic Republic itself – while it has understandable historical roots in the savagery of the Shah's regime which preceded it, not to mention the bravery of its people – is a dangerously contrived and inherently unfree state which was locked into immobility by an unworldly and now long-dead ayatollah.

And those nuclear arms? How many of us reported a blunt statement which the Supreme Leader and the man who ultimately controls all nuclear development in Iran made on 4 June, just eight days before the elections? "Nuclear weapons," he said in a speech in which he encouraged Iranians to vote, "are religiously forbidden (haram) in Islam and the Iranian people do not have such a weapon. But the Western countries and the US in particular, through false propaganda, claim that Iran seeks to build nuclear bombs – which is totally false..."

There are few provable assurances in the Middle East, often few facts and a lot of lies. Dangers are as thick as snakes in the desert. As I write, I have just received another call from Lebanon. "Mr Fisk, a girl has been shot in Iran. I have a video from the internet. You can see her body..." And you know what? I think he might be right.

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Robert Fisk: Khamenei is fighting for his own position as well as Ahmadinejad's

Is he worried about another clergyman who would like to be Supreme Leader?

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-khamenei-is-fighting-for-his-own-position-as-well-as-ahmadinejads-1710746.html>

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The evolution of Iran's revolution

The current confrontation is another phase of the country's century-long political journey. And this one, like the others, will bring lasting changes.

by Robin Wright

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-wright21-2009jun21.0.4656678.story>

Interview: 'Crisis of Legitimacy' in Iran

Arang Keshavarzian, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, New York University

<http://www.cfr.org/publication/19654/>

Theocracies Are Doomed. Thank God.

By Jon Meacham | NEWSWEEK

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For years American conversation about Iraq has included a refrain about how we cannot expect to create a Jeffersonian democracy on the Euphrates. The admonition is true: if you think about it, America itself is not really a Jeffersonian democracy either (we are more of a Jacksonian one, which means there is a powerful central government with a cultural tilt toward states' rights). And yet Jefferson keeps coming to mind as the drama in Iran unfolds. The events there seem to be a chapter in the very Jeffersonian story of the death of theocracy, or rule by clerics, and the gradual separation of church and state. In one of the last letters of his life, in 1826, Jefferson said this of the Declaration of Independence: "May it be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves."

However strong they may be for a time, theocracies cannot finally survive modernity, because one of the key features of modernity is the shift of emphasis from the privileges and power of institutions (a monarch, a clerical establishment, the state itself) to the rights and relative autonomy of the individual. In many ways, the modern virtues are the ones we associate with democracy: a free (or free-ish) flow of ideas, capital and people in an ethos in which men and women are free (or, again, free-ish) to form their own opinions and follow the dictates of their own consciences. By their very nature, theocracies are at risk in the face of such a world, for they are founded on an un-modern and undemocratic idea—that temporal power should be

invested in those who claim that their decisions about the life of this world carry divine authority from a deity who dwells in the world to come.

To say that theocracies are doomed is not to argue that religion is any less important in our age. Quite the opposite: religious faith is an intrinsic element of human experience ("All men," said Homer, "have need of the gods"), and religion can be the undoing of a religious establishment, for an individual's interpretation of the applications of faith to politics may well differ from the institutional interpretation. There is a deep irony at work here. Theocracies usually mandate the teaching of religion, but the teaching of religion—the spread of texts and commentaries, the opening of theological debates among the people as well as the clerics—can lead not to uniform public belief but to a questioning of orthodoxy.

Which is always a favorite activity of a new generation. The products of one world often react against the world of their parents: the descendants of the established church in Colonial America, for example, grew up to favor religious freedom. In Iran, many of those protesting the regime have come of age after the 1979 revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his *velayat-e faqih*, or rule by the Supreme Jurist, to power. "The world of the successors is almost always different from the world of the founders," says Walter Russell Mead, a scholar of religion and foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Revolutionaries become what they beheld; yesterday's outsiders are today's insiders. The promise of theocracy has to go unfulfilled, for no one can bring sacred order to profane chaos.

The work of politics is not the same as the work of religion. Religious values can inform politics and civil society, but heaven and earth are ultimately separate provinces. The corruptions of the world always make their way into religious establishments, and once they do, religious authorities lose their credibility. "Shortcomings and hypocrisies that would be bad enough in secular politicians are seen as even worse in clerics," says Mead.

Totalitarianism based on theology is destined to fail for the same reason other totalitarianisms fail: because, as Jefferson said, "the general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." In an imperfect world, there will never be a complete end of theocracy any more than there will ever be a complete end to tyranny. Power will ebb and flow, regimes come and go. But in the main, history's path leads to more liberty, not less—to what Jefferson thought of as the bursting of chains, a sound you could almost hear in the crisis of Tehran.

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No Matter Who Is President of Iran, They Would Stone Me

by Lila Ghobady

Why didn't I vote in the latest elections for the president of the country of my birth, Iran? Because no matter who is the president of Iran, they would stone me!

As a young Iranian woman, I require big changes in order to convince myself that a change in president would mean an improvement of my basic rights as human being inside Iran.

Here are some simple facts that demonstrate that irrespective of who is president, I would be stoned to death in Iran:

1. As a woman whose husband refused to divorce her when she escaped the country and came to Canada as a refugee, I am considered this man's wife as long as I am alive. It does not matter if I live separated from him for years, have divorced him in my new country and am in a relationship with a new man. Under Iranian laws and the Iranian constitution, which are based on strict Islamic laws, I am considered his wife and am at risk of being stoned for "adultery" if I ever go back to Iran. In fact as a woman, I have no right to divorce my husband under the country's law while he has the privilege of marrying three more times without divorcing me. This is the case no matter who is the president of Iran; Ahamdinejad or Mousavi.

2. As a journalist and film maker, I am called upon by the Islamic Republic of Iran to respect the red lines. These "red lines" include belief and respect for the Supreme Leader and the savagely unjust rules of Islamic law in my country. I am expected not to write or demand equal rights, as this is not permitted under the law. I am not allowed to make the underground films I have made about the plight of sex trade workers and other social diseases rampant within Iran, as I did secretly 12 years ago. In fact I am not allowed to make any film without the permission and without censorship by Iran's Minister of Culture. Imagine - Iran has a Minister of Culture, who decides what is culturally acceptable, or not! If I did openly do all these things in Iran, I would disappear, I would be tortured, I would be raped, I would be killed as so many women journalist, film makers and activists in Iran have been. Among these are included Zahara Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian photo journalist, who was brutally tortured and murdered for attempting to photograph and publicize brutalities committed by the Iranian regime.

3. I would be considered an infidel if I was born into a Muslim family and later converted to another religion or simply decided to consider myself a non-believer who does not follow

strict Islamic morality. My branding as an infidel would result in my public murder, probably by stoning. No matter who is the president of Iran.

4. I would be lashed in public, raped in jail and stoned to death for selling my body in order to bring food to my family, as so many unfortunate Iranian women have been forced to do, as a single mother with no social assistance in a rich but deeply corrupted country like Iran. Even the simple crime of being in love, engaged in a relationship outside of marriage, or worse yet, giving birth to a human being out of Islamic wedlock. The product of such a union would be considered a bastard and would be taken away from me, and I would receive 100 lashes immediately after giving birth to my baby, No matter who is the president of Iran.

5. No matter who is the president of Iran, I would be denied a university education, a government job and a say in politics and it would be as if I basically did not exist if I was a Baha'i. I would be considered half a Shia Muslim, in all levels of society if I was Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian or even a Sunni Muslim, no matter who is the president of Iran.

6. No matter who is the president of Iran, I would disappear and be found dead (if I was lucky) if I were to keep writing and demanding my basic rights as a woman and intellectual who has no say in politics. (There was not even one female minister in the so-called "reformist cabinet" of Mohamad Khatami) If I argue and challenge the authorities that despite the fact that Iran is one of the richest countries in the planet when it comes to resources, still 70% of my people live in poverty because of corruption among the leaders. Huge numbers of children go to sleep on empty stomachs. Little girls are forced to sell their bodies in the streets of Tehran, Dubai and even China, just to survive. I would be jailed or disappeared no matter who is president of Iran.

7. No matter who is the president of Iran, I would not be able to be a judge or even a witness in court, as a woman. This is because in front of an Islamic Court judge two women equal one man. No matter how educated and aware I might be, I would be considered half of a man who might be at a demonstrably much lower level of education and reliability, No matter who is the president of Iran.

8. No matter who is the president of Iran, I would be lashed in public if I did not cover my head and body in public in compliance with the mandatory Islamic dress code. If I would be cut at a private family/friend/ wedding taking place in mixed company I would be punished for the crime of not being covered. Much worse would happen if I was caught drinking. It would not matter if I considered myself a non-believer of Islam who simply does not want to

follow Islamic rules. I would be punished harshly, lashed, raped while in custody, before going on trial, No matter who is the president of Iran.

9. No matter who is the president of Iran, I would be killed if I was openly a homosexual. I would be denied all rights as a human being since homosexuality considered one of greatest possible sins under the Iranian Islamic regime. I would be considered a criminal and be killed because "there are no homosexuals in Iran!" That's odd, because some of my closest friends in Iran say they are gay, but stayed "in the closet" for fear of execution, No matter who is the president of Iran.

10. No matter who is the president of Iran, Iranian activists living in exile, including myself and many others who are openly opposed to the regime for its cruel human rights violations, will not be able to enter the country. We would be caught at the airport by the regime's police forces and forced to apologize and sign an apology letter for our actions against the regime. If we refused, we would be jailed without trial for wanting freedom for our fellow people. I would be denied of my basic rights as an opposition to the regime and would be called "spy", jailed, tortured, raped and executed, This would happen regardless of who was the president of Iran.

This is Iran. This is what it means to live under Ayotollah Khomeini and his goons. No change is possible while Iran is controlled by autocratic, fundamentalist religious despots who determine the laws of the land. There has been no real election. Candidates are all hand-picked and cleared by a central religious committee. It is a farcical imitation of the free nomination/election process that we have pictured in the free world. There is no possibility that a secular, pluralistic, freedom-loving democratic person who loves his or her country can become a candidate to run for president (or any other office) in Iran.

Let us not forget that Mousavi was Prime Minister of Iran in the 1980s, when more than ten thousand political prisoners were executed after three-minute sham trials. He has been a part of the Iranian dictatorship system for the past 30 years. If he had not been, he would not be allowed to be a candidate in the first place.

For these and many other reasons, I did not choose to vote and instead to boycott the election, along with many other Iranians. But this time, many Iranians who boycotted the vote in the last election voted in this one because of their profound disgust with President Ahamdinejad. I sympathise with them, but I believe that there exists no better option for the people of Iran than to entirely overthrow the Islamic regime that oppresses the country of my birth. I strongly support my people's movement against the ever-present dictatorship and violence

infecting my country. I will scream, along with my compatriots, "Down with dictators!"
"Down with murderers!" "Down with the brutal oppression that is the Islamic regime and all
of its toxic, self-serving alliances."

Long live freedom in Iran!

Lila Ghobady is an exiled Iranian writer-journalist and film maker living in Canada since 2002. She has been involved with human rights since working as a journalist in Iran and has continued her work in Canada when she arrived as a refugee. She has worked as a Producer and associate Director of internationally-praised underground films along fellow exiled film maker Moslem Mansouri before leaving Iran. Her recent film Forbidden Sun Dance has been shown in India, France, Canada and Sweden. As a journalist, she received the BlogHer of the Week award for her Review piece on Slum dog Millionaire in March 2009. Lila has received her master's degree in Canadian/women studies from Carleton University in Ottawa. For more information, please read her blog at: www.banoufilm.blogspot.com. Lila can be contacted by e-mail at: lilacforfreedom(at)gmail.com