

There Is a Third Voice in Iran

By Gita Hashemi. Published in Fuse Magazine, Vol. 33, #1 (2010).

On 7 March 1979, less than a month after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the then-supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, demanded that the transitional government ban unveiled women from entering or working in government premises. The next day, and for several days after, thousands of women staged spontaneous street demonstrations and sit-ins in front of government buildings in many cities across Iran. The largest demonstration started on March 8 at University of Tehran where, for the first time since the 1953 U.S.-funded coup d'état that brought down the popularly elected nationalist government of Mohammad Mosadegh, a coalition of Iranian feminist groups were marking International Women's Day with a conference. The conference was well attended by international feminists, including a group of French feminists who collaborated with Iranian activists in filming women's protests and making the only documentary to date about this historical moment. [1]

The Tehran protest covered large city blocks along just re-named Revolution Street and to the headquarters of National Radio and Television (today known as Seda va Sima) and the Ministry of Justice. Many men — mostly leftist activists — joined the protests and some acted as human barriers between women and the torrents of fundamentalists who came at them with sticks, chains and utility knives. This was the yet unorganized early version of what we know today as the Basij militia. The protestors' message was simple: "We revolted in order to be equal." The popular slogan was "*dar tolo-e azadi, jay-e haq-e zan khali*" (in the dawn of freedom women's rights are missing).

However, the ideologues and leaders of the male-dominated political organizations that were soon to stage their own opposition to the Islamic government (and lose), abandoned women, arguing that gender equality could only be defined as a by-product of socialist and/or democratic systems, and that focusing on women's rights at that moment was secondary to the class struggle and the larger struggle for democracy. Women were thus literally and ideologically beaten back into submission. Mandatory veiling, soon extending beyond government buildings to encompass all public places, was one in a series of concerted attacks on the civil and legal rights and personal freedoms of women, including taking away divorce, custody and travel rights, and limiting women's fields of study and work.

In spite of this historical set back, over the past 10 years women's rights activists have been using highly creative and diverse forms of social and political engagement to once again mount one of the most serious and radical campaigns for change in Iran. Resisting repeated attacks, women's groups have articulated major legal and political challenges to the fundamentalists' rule by demanding changes to the constitution of the Islamic Republic toward full equal rights for women (for example, the One Million Signature Campaign), and, simultaneously, mobilizing women to break social and cultural barriers such as gender-based violence, poverty and unemployment.

In a remarkable recent documentary titled "We Are Half of Iran's Population" [2] feminist Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-etemad [3] interviews a large number of women

including students and housewives along side political personalities, researchers and women's rights activists from diverse political/ideological formations who work in a wide range of areas of research and activism. Made over the few months prior to the 12 June 2009 elections and released on YouTube just a week before the election day, the film also briefly looks at the activist coalitions that were created this past spring in order to take advantage of the brief opening in the public sphere during the presidential campaign for discussing women's agenda and their needs and demands. A common question the director asks of the interviewees is what demands they have of the presidential candidates and on what basis they will decide whom to vote for. The footage is then played back to three out of four candidates (Ahmadinejad did not respond to Bani-etemad's invitation to participate), and the candidates' responses to women's demands recorded as part of the documentary.

The majority of activists in the film — from Islamic to secular-nationalist and/or leftist orientations — demand fundamental changes to the discriminatory legal and political frameworks in Iran, including changing the sections of the constitution that enshrine discrimination against women. Other demands include joining the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a signatory yet), opening economic, social and political opportunities for women, guaranteeing the right of women to organize politically, several social policy demands including social spending to create work opportunities and equal rights to education for women. Many of those featured in the film argue that these measures should not be labeled as women's concerns only as they benefit the entire society and therefore must be priority concerns of the society as a whole in this election round.

In their turn, the three candidates — Mehdi Karroubi, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (the leader of the so-called Green Movement) and Mohsen Rezyee— and their advisors and/or wives, while acknowledging women's active contributions in the 1979 Revolution and to socio-political life, pay lip service to only some of the issues raised by women stopping short of formulating concrete responses to the questions asked of them. Most interesting and evasive is Mousavi's response. He insists that given the “traditional” dominant culture in Iran, any solutions to women's issues ~~have to~~ must be in adherence with traditions. His conservatism comes hard even to his fully veiled wife, Zahra Rahnavard, who jumps in at one point to say that nevertheless the executive branch has both responsibilities and means of changing some of the laws and conditions. Mousavi's response is reminiscent of Mehdi Bazargan's, the prime minister of the 1979 Transitional Government, who responded to Khomeini's decree and women's protests by issuing a statement saying that although he did not agree with mandatory veiling, the women in his own family and those of his cabinet ministers' had always been veiled in accordance with their Islamic faith and traditions and followed that by signing policy letters that barred women judges from presiding in courtrooms and closed government buildings to unveiled women.

Rakhshan Bani-etemad's timely intervention brilliantly displays the fundamentalism inherent in the views of all of the candidates and their inability to respond meaningfully to people's demands. It leaves no doubts about the futility of supporting one candidate over the

others as it correctly shows them all as part of the same regressive political discourse that has dominated Iran in the past 30 years.

During the post-election events in June and July 2009, while the world focused on street demonstrations and/or behind-the-curtain negotiations between political factions and presidential candidates and their cleric supporters/foes, many commentators and observers expressed ‘surprise’ at the strong presence of women on the streets. Such commentaries showed a complete lack of familiarity with the Iranian history and an ignorance of the current grass roots political dynamics. Bani-etemad’s documentary shows a highly organized, home-grown and broad-based women’s rights movement that has, over at least a decade of overt activism and 3 decades of resistance, created the socio-cultural conditions for women to participate not just as so many bodies in street demonstrations, but as significant voices in the country’s political discourse. It was no accident that many women’s rights activists and their legal teams were amongst the first to be arrested — in their offices, homes or on the streets — as the post-election uprising started. The guardians of the Islamic Republic were quite clear that the persistent daily work of these activists and the vast networks they have created in collaborating with students, workers and ethnic rights activists had directly contributed to the massive shift in the country’s political culture and prepared the ground for broad mobilization of ordinary people in the political process and the ensuing mass protests.

For the progressive people of the world to show solidarity with the grass roots struggles for change in Iran, it is not enough to rally around the face of Neda Aghasoltan, a female accidental victim, or hail Mousavi, an accidental leader who by now has almost fully lost any popular support and disappeared from the picture. It is not enough to get on the green band wagon carrying viral songs by this or that Western band or to applaud disconnected diasporic born-again politicians playing “radical chic” by sporting green dresses and scarves in international film festivals. It is essential to recognize and support the articulate and organized progressive forces in Iran. The Iranian Women’s movement is not a U.S. Feminist Majority export, it didn’t start organizing in June 2009, and it is not a momentary engagement. It is one of the most radical oppositions to the ruling elite as it challenges the very foundations of the fundamentalist patriarchal system that governs Iran. *This is the “third voice.”* Become familiar with it. Amplify it. Broadcast it. *Start here: <http://www.forequality.info/english/>*

Notes

1. The documentary simply titled 8th March 1979 is available at <http://video.google.de/videoplay?docid=8842589185458786745&hl=de#>
2. We are half of Iran’s Population is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_BinbdFndI
3. <http://iranianstudies.ca/privatelives/000432.html>