
The Role of Women in Iran's New Popular Revolution

RAMESH SEPEHRRAD

President
National Committee of Women for a Democratic Iran

Many observers see the current political discourse in Iran as a debate about Islamic democracy, rule of law, civil society, and reforms. They consider President Mohammad Khatami's reforms part of the process of transforming Ayatollah Khomeini's theocracy into a relatively democratic and tolerant state. The reformists' success was affirmed by the elections for the sixth Majlis (parliament) in April of 2000. Western proponents of reform even compared Khatami to Mikhail Gorbachev and encouraged dialogue and increasing economic ties. Japan and Western Europe pursue the approach of "constructive engagement policy," with a cautionary note to not jeopardize Khatami's position in the factional infighting in Iran. Even the Clinton Administration shifted from dual containment to engagement in 1997, when the United States offered to enter into dialogue with authorized representatives of the Iranian Government without preconditions. This all supports the idea that there is a healthy political debate between "reformers" and "hardliners" in an emerging democracy.

The reality is that there is much more to Iran's politics than the rivalry between Khatami and Khamenei—reformers and conservatives. The discourse goes beyond their daily antagonism, rifts and reconciliations. The two leaders are friends on some days and foes on others. Closures of newspapers and vetoes of legislation are essential to their political posturing. They discredit each other through televised court hearings, where they air jaw-dropping exposes of plunder,

bribery, deception and decadence. For his part, Khatami exploits the slogans of “rule of law,” “women’s rights,” “civil society,” “freedom of the press,” and “democracy.” Khatami’s view that Iran’s constitution defines the rule of law is disturbing because it contains clauses sanctioning stoning, execution, religious persecution, and supreme leadership as pillars of the theocracy. He does not challenge the system as a whole; he works within the confines of theocracy the supreme clerical leadership (*velayat-e faqih*). Khatami’s record indicates that he is not the embodiment of reform, as some would have us believe.

The real political discourse in Iran today takes place in popular protests, which are not simply random expressions of frustration at the lack of progress or reform; they reflect a rejection of theocracy in its entirety. In the past several months massive demonstrations against the regime have filled the streets. Some analysts, to their credit, have cited these recent and ongoing mass demonstrations

Popular protests reflect a rejection of theocracy in its entirety.

as embodiments of genuine political discourse. They conclude that these events have sufficiently destabilized the theocratic dictatorship of Khatami and Khamenei so as to bring it to the brink of overthrow. Many have even suggested “another revolution,” but never venture to identify the leading forces of this imminent upheaval. The establishment of democracy in Iran can only be achieved through

regime change. The current infrastructure, the supreme clerical leadership—*velayat-e faqih*—has proven incompatible with democracy. Hence, the radicalization of slogans such as, “Down with Khamenei; down with Khatami,” bears the message of another revolution. As CNN reported on 14 November 2002, “The students’ loudest chants have often been for Khatami’s resignation, as they vent their frustration at his inability to deliver.” One student said, “We never considered Khatami the leader of reforms. He was like a catalyst and he prevented the collapse of the system.”¹

Even in the most sympathetic analyses of the current situation, the leading force of the forthcoming revolution—Iran’s women—is left unnamed. Women have bore the heaviest burden under the theocratic regime, and they are leading a new social, political, and ideological revolution. Women and youth in Iran are challenging restrictions and limitations on a daily basis. This resistance should be recognized as the essence of political, cultural and social discourse in Iran.

Iran’s Supreme Clerical Leadership (*Velayat-e faqih*)

From a woman’s perspective, it would be chilling to see the Islamic Republic of Iran—based on misogyny, repression and the stifling of political expression—

reach its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2004. The Iranian Presidential election in May of 1997 was indeed a milestone for the theocratic state and inspired much domestic and international talk of moderation and reforms; Khatami promised the people that he would establish the rule of law within a constitutional framework. But in November of 1997, he clarified what he meant by rule of law: "the defense of the law means above all the defense of the *velayat-e faqih*."²

Institutionalized violence against women

When Khatami defends *velayat-e faqih* he is defending the degradation of women. Iran's constitution—firmly rooted in the principle of *velayat-e faqih*—controls both the public and private lives of women. While the Article 21 of the constitution indicates, "The government must ensure the rights of women in all respects, in conformity with Islamic criteria," it leaves interpretation to the male clergy.³ Article 167 of the constitution explains, "The Judge is bound to attempt to rule on each case, on the basis of the codified law. In case of the absence of any such law, he has to deliver his judgment on the basis of official Islamic sources and authentic fatawa."⁴ Thus, judges must have authoritative religious qualifications in order to issue an "authentic" decree. Women are considered too emotional to be judges. Article 83 of the Penal Code, called the Law of Hodoud, stipulates that the penalty for fornication is flogging, 100 strokes of the lash, for unmarried male and female offenders.⁵ Article 102 states that the punishment for married offenders (adulterers) is stoning—regardless of gender. But the stipulated method for a man is that he be buried up to his waist, and a woman up to her neck. In a confidential governmental document, revealed by the Women's Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, ten cases of stoning had been recorded from March to September of 2002.

Article 102 indicates, "Women who appear on streets and in public without the prescribed 'Islamic Hejab' will be condemned to 74 strokes of the lash."⁶ Khomeini called the long Islamic cloak, or chador, that covers all but the woman's face "the flag of the revolution."⁷ The regime defines the subservient role of women in Article 105 of the Civil Code: "In the relationship between a man and a woman, the man is responsible as head of the family." The Council of Guardians has decreed, "A woman cannot leave her home without her husband's permission, even to attend her father's funeral." Article 1117 of the Civil Code states that the husband may ban his wife from any technical profession that conflicts with family life or her character.⁸ Article 1133 of the Civil Code states, "A man can divorce his wife whenever he so chooses and does not have to give her advance notice."⁹

Laws prohibit women from the presidency, judgeships, and certain educational fields, and restrict their inheritance rights. According to Iran's constitution, only men are allowed to run for president. In 1997, a top election official, Ayatollah Emami Kashani, said, "Only recognized statesmen who are

committed to Iran's Islamic government and *velayat-e faqih* will be allowed to run in presidential elections."¹⁰ In July 1998, Judiciary Chief Yazdi, member of The Guardian Council, in his Friday prayer sermon said, "The women judges I mentioned hold positions in the judiciary, they receive salaries, they attend trials, they provide counsel, but they do not preside over trials or issue verdicts."¹¹

Demography and the Social and Political Impact

Many Iranians are indifferent to the debate between reformers and hardliners because neither political faction addresses the issues most pressing to them, such as employment and education. Therefore, the desires and grievances of a new generation of Iranians are increasingly being aired in the streets. Young men and women are increasingly demanding government responsiveness, specifically from the self-proclaimed "reformists." In the summer of 2000, some 4,000 Iranian women protested against poor living conditions by burning tires and blocking a main road southwest of Tehran. It was a clear indication that people had lost hope in Khatami and his reformers, who have failed to deliver progress on the economy. The domestic debate over religious reform and political ideology, which dominates the formation of Iran's policies, is not going to be resolved by electing a reformist president or parliament. The fundamental problems are with the state and its relationship with society.

Frustration among Iran's youths and women has reached the point of explosion. More than half of Iran's 66 million people are below the age of 22, meaning that every year hundreds of thousands want jobs that do not exist. On an international scale, Iran is ranked 108 out of 110 on workforce conditions.¹² In urban areas women make up only 9.5 percent of the workforce; and 8.8 percent in rural areas.¹³ Even Khatami's advisor on women's affairs acknowledged that women suffer discrimination in employment and promotion in government offices: "Some officials are of the opinion that men have more of a role in running the family, so they favor the men."¹⁴

Economic obstacles

A true improvement for women and youths in Iran requires consistent, responsible and sustainable economic policies. But mismanagement, corruption, inflation, unemployment, poverty, and destructive exploitation of oil and gas reserves, as well political and ideological infighting after Khomeini's death, have hampered the formulation and execution of coherent economic policies in Iran. Economic decisions are based on political interests, not economic logic. Iran's economy is a combination of state ownership of oil, central planning, rural agriculture, other large enterprises, and small-scale private trading and service ventures. Khatami has adhered to the market reform plans of the former

president, Rafsanjani. He has indicated that he will pursue diversification of Iran's oil-reliant economy, although he has made little progress toward that goal. Lower oil prices in 1997 and 1998 had a dire impact on Iran's economy, because the private sector is dependent on oil revenue. The rise in oil prices in 1999-2000 provided fiscal breathing room for Khatami's administration, but no solution for Iran's structural economic problems, including the encouragement of foreign investment.¹⁵

"Revolutionary institutions," mostly run by the sons of the powerful Ayatollahs, are the most corrupt elements in Iran's economy. They are not held accountable by the government with regard to taxes, and they consistently rely on special privileges such as government grants. They receive foreign currency at favorable rates and low interest loans. On 30 October 2002, Iran's meat market plummeted 50 percent because of illegally imported rotten meat. Several newspapers said the imports had received customs stamps, accusing Rafsanjani's clan and elements in the Revolutionary Guards Corps of complicity.¹⁶

Theocracy and Women

Political changes in Iran have brought fundamental change in the way women view their rights, political reforms, and strategies for achieving the desired political, social, and legal equality. Although the women of Iran are the most suppressed constituency, they are nevertheless the most dynamic section of the society, next to the youth.

Women's education and social status

Iranian women face significant legal discrimination in education, employment and freedom of travel. Girls' schools operate under "no-male zone" laws. Official statistics released in 1998 indicate that 90 percent of girls in rural areas are dropouts. In urban areas, by contrast, there has been an increase of female participation at all levels of education over the past two decades. Women are prohibited from study in many different fields.¹⁷ In July 1997, a lawyer testified on this subject in the journal *Zanan*. Her daughter, according to the examination brochure of the so-called, "private Islamic universities," was forbidden to take courses such as electrical engineering, telecommunications, industrial engineering, and geography. On 7 January 2001, the new parliament voted to amend a law that prohibits women from studying abroad without the permission of a male guardian. A few days later, the Council of Guardians, the appointed body of religious constitutional watchdogs, overturned the amendment.¹⁸

Over the past four years, female students have increasingly widened their academic superiority over their male counterparts. In what the Ayatollahs consider a, "dangerous imbalance," in 2002 female students secured 63 percent

of university places. Of the 1.5 million students taking entrance exams, nearly 60 percent were women. The Ayatollahs consider the presence of a large number of women in the classrooms as, "corruption," and a distraction for their male counterparts. This shift, however, does not necessarily mean more jobs for women in Iran, where women account for just 12 percent of the active workforce.¹⁹

Clerics in Iran, be they "reformers" or "hardliners," insist and depend on the central role of the *velayat-e faqih*. One measure of the pervasiveness of the theocracy is the misogynistic law implemented by the mullahs. These policies and practices have established gender apartheid in Iran, and for that reason, Iran's women are convinced that real change must take place not just through a regime change, but also by changing the level of women's consciousness and leadership in future Iran. Some women's rights activists say the revolution turned back the clock on Iranian women, but others argue that the revolution has given birth to a new generation of women who have taken the lead in the resistance movement. Both views are correct.

Women staged the first demonstration after Khomeini's rise to power, in protest against the mandatory Islamic covering. Subsequently, female students, teachers, intellectuals, journalists, workers, and housewives gradually joined the mainstream resistance movements protesting on different issues. The clerical regime's reaction has been the execution of more than 100,000 and the imprisonment of 140,000 political opponents, a large number of them women.

The religious leader of the city of Rasht in northern Iran, warned women not to cross the "red line" saying, "Under the Shah, women did not dare question religious authorities. Nowadays, those who, thanks to the revolution, have gained prestige and sit in the Islamic parliament dare to ask us, why must we wear the veil, why is there inequality in inheritance...Be careful not to cross the red line!"²⁰ In 2002, the UN Human Rights Commission failed to adopt a resolution on human rights in Iran. The day after the vote of the UN Commission, six men were hanged in public in three crowded locations in central Tehran. In 2002 official media reported more than 350 executions, a rise of almost 300 percent from 2001.

Khatami and Women's Rights

Initial excitement over Khatami's presidency and the promise of an improvement in women's rights in Iran was countered with a dramatic admission from the government on the proliferation of prostitution. Not only are prostitutes becoming more and more visible on the streets due to economic hardships, but they are also becoming younger and younger. Welfare officials in Iran have admitted that at least 300,000 prostitutes are working in various cities. The number of run-away girls—a new phenomenon in Iran—is on the rise, with a

30 percent increase in 2001 alone. There are close to 2 million homeless women, and one million without any social benefits. The official report said that the average age of prostitutes in Iran had dropped to 20 from 27 a few years ago.²¹

Limited divorce and employment rights, changes in the legal age of marriage for girls from nine to 14, and even the talk of ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) were all among Khatami's political maneuvers in battles with the hardliners. Khatami admits his inability—likely unwillingness—to enforce the rights and freedoms granted to women. It is the younger generation of Iran and women in particular that have highlighted Khatami's incompetence and refusal to implement real social change.

Khatami's presidency has been one of the darkest periods in terms of passage of legislation affecting women. The parliament, with the encouragement of religious leaders, proposed and passed a number of laws that jeopardize the health, education, and well being of women and girls in Iran. In April 1998, parliament approved a new law requiring segregation of hospitals and all health care services. This law compromises the already precarious health care for women and girls, since there are not enough trained female physicians and health care personnel to meet the needs of all the women and girls in Iran. Any discussion of women's rights outside of Islamic law is prohibited according to a bill passed by the parliament in August of 1998.

Khatami's presidency has been one of the darkest periods in terms of legislation affecting women.

Publications are banned from defending women's rights in a manner that may provoke conflict between genders.²² Temporary marriage, or *Sigbeh*, which enables a man to marry a woman for a limited period of time—even one hour—in exchange for money, is permitted in Iran. Ayatollah Muhammad Moussavi Bojnourdi speaks of establishing "chastity houses," or brothels, to control prostitution and provide financial coverage for widows in Iran.²³

Means of Political Expression

Given the widening gap between the people and the government, the political will of the general public has been manifested in demonstrations, social protests, workers strikes, labor walkouts, and street protests over local issues such as water shortages. Many may mistake the election process in Iran for a form of political expression. However, the mere existence of the Council of Guardians, which filters all potential candidates prior to any election, is in diametric opposition to popular choice. Ayatollah Yazdi, a powerful member of the Council

of Guardians, clearly defined the position of the theocratic state: "The difference between Islamic and non-Islamic human rights is in the concept of rights itself."²⁴ A very vague definition of rights creates the gap between the people and the government. Moreover, it is clear that neither the male-dominated parliament, which clearly believes that the rule of *velayat-e faqih* should determine the fate of women, nor lobbying of influential leaders effectively promotes reform in Iran. Moreover, Iran's *velayat-e faqih* system offers freedom of expression only to those who are loyal to the supreme leadership of Khamenei. The absolute control of this system muzzles the media and the press.

On a broader scale, the theocratic state is unable to fully control the political expression manifest in student demonstrations, the radicalization of slogans used in such protests, distribution of political statements and graffiti in public places, websites of women's organizations, chat rooms, and satellite feeds from abroad. The most organized opposition activities are conducted by the People's Mojahedin of Iran (PMOI), which coordinates public protests in major cities throughout Iran. In November 2002, an extensive wave of anti-government protests at Iranian universities carried on for several days, with demonstrations and sit-ins by thousands of students in Tehran and rallies, strikes and protests by students in different cities across the country. Several thousand students staged a campus sit-in at Tehran University on 13 November 2002, demonstrating against the ruling religious dictatorship by chanting, "student movement ready for uprising", "free all political prisoners," and "down with dictatorship."²⁵ In the provinces, student protests were reported in Bandar-Abbas, Shiraz, Birjand, Dameghan, Ahwaz, Tabriz, Gilan, Bu-Ali Sina University in Hamedan, Yassouj, Zabol, Kashan, Qom, and Zanjan. The official Jomhuri-Islami daily wrote, "certain suspicious elements posing as students chanted deviated and extremist slogans against the authorities." The paper said the demonstrators' aim was, "to bring about a revolt," and called on the regime's security agencies to counter these moves, which, it said, were being, "instigated by suspicious elements from outside universities who come to universities to pursue their deviated aims." Massoud Rajavi, president of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), described the ongoing anti-government demonstrations as another sign of the explosive situation and the revolutionary state of Iranian society.²⁶

The Future for Iranian Women

An overview of the discussion of gender issues and the current position of women in the resistance movement indicates that women activists are engaged in a battle against the government of Iran. They expose the injustices of their lives to the world community. They invite history to be the judge. Their "ideological" discourse has a clear political and social agenda. These efforts are

being conducted on many different fronts, and derive their support from organized movements.

Maryam Rajavi has emerged as the most serious proponent of women's empowerment in Iran and the Middle East. Through her innovative approach, Iranian women are increasingly breaking away from traditional roles. In 1985, she realized that just fighting for social and political rights would not guarantee women's liberty. Women's involvement in all aspects of the resistance movement was essential to adequately fight against Khomeini's mentality, and was an essential step towards equality. She declared war on Khomeini by charging, and indeed acknowledging, that his mentality is hidden deep in the minds of the most enlightened sector of Iranian society. Many who claim to believe in the equality of women and men and oppose any form of discrimination, in reality, do not. The women's struggle in Iran began a new phase as Maryam Rajavi encouraged women to believe in themselves, and demanded that men believe in women. She enforced positive discrimination in the ranks of the Iranian Resistance. This process resulted in women's leadership in the political and military ranks of the most organized resistance movement in Iran's history. Currently over 70 percent of the commanders in the National Liberation Army (NLA) of Iran are women. The NLA is the military wing of the Iranian people's resistance movement and is an unrecognized player in the future of Iran. Rajavi called for a women's united front against Islamic fundamentalism. Iranian women from all walks of life, social classes, religions, ages, and levels of education have joined the resistance to claim their rightful position in the society.²⁷

On 31 October 2002, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld predicted an early violent overthrow of the Iranian government: "I suspect that during my lifetime we're going to see a change in that situation over there and that the young people and the women and the people who believe in freedom will overthrow that cleric government."²⁸

The Resistance Movement: The Key to a Realistic Policy

The NCRI is the largest and most active representative body of the Iranian opposition in exile, with more than 550 members, half of whom are women. Massoud Rajavi and Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr, who left the coalition in 1984, established the NCRI in 1981. Religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Kurds and Baluchis, are also represented in the Council. It consists of five member organizations and parties along with Iranian political figures, technocrats, specialists, artists, army officers, intellectuals, and scholars residing in Europe and the United States. In August 1993, NCRI members elected Maryam Rajavi as the President for the transition period after the current regime's ouster, until the ratification of the new constitution by Iran's National Legislative Constituent

Assembly and election of the new president consistent with the new constitution. NCRI considers itself a parliament-in-exile and has published a platform for its transitional government. It believes in political pluralism and a multi-party system. It considers elections and the popular vote as the sole criterion of legitimacy for elected officials.²⁹

NCRI enjoys a great support among Iranians and members of both the U.S. Congress and European parliaments. The U.S. Congress considers the NCRI a “democratic coalition.” This organization holds the largest rallies in U.S. and European countries. The NCRI platform consists of:

- Adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its related international covenants;
- A commitment to complete freedom of expression, belief, the press, poetical parties, and associations;
- A belief in the separation of church and state;
- Promotion of equality between man and women in all aspects;
- A commitment to abolish all forms of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities;
- Recognition of the free-market economy and “national capitalism and bazaar, private and personal ownership and investment;”
- A commitment to the return of Iran to the family of nations and to improving relations with countries both in the region and in the West;
- Support for peace in the Middle East and the continuing campaign to expose the Iranian regime’s backing for terrorist groups and efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.³⁰

Due to the NCRI’s popular support inside and outside of Iran, the Iranian government considers them, in particular its largest member organization—the PMOI—as its main threat. In fact, the Iranian government constantly demands from western countries the restriction of PMOI activities as the pre-condition for improving relations. Some European countries even bowed to these conditions while failing to realize the “constructive engagement policy” has utterly failed for two reasons:

- The self-proclaimed “reformers” of Khatami’s faction are an extension of the *velayat-e faqih* system. Therefore, the search for an alternative within the regime is futile.
- More importantly the viable alternative exists outside of the sphere of ruling establishment, which is the fruit of more than two decades of struggle against this regime.

The search for a realistic and effective policy on Iran, at its core, must recognize this alternative, the Iranian Resistance, as the key to a democratic, peace-seeking Iran. It is best described by a student at Tehran's University who said recent demonstrations were different from those two years ago in that now students are protesting against the regime in its entirety and not against a particular faction. He added: "Students are disillusioned with reforms from within the regime and are chanting slogans against the whole system."³¹

In November of 2002, the NCRI called for a "National Solidarity Front" against Tehran's Islamic regime, following a meeting of its parliament. The front would encompass "all Iranian 'republicans' who are campaigning for a democratic, independent and secular regime."³² U.S. President George W. Bush said on 12 July 2002, "As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom—greater tolerance—they will have no better friend than the United States of America." The United States should align itself with the desire of the Iranian people and look to the popular opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

Those who portray expressions of popular discontent in Iran as unorganized or sporadic are neglecting reality. Iran's popular resistance has a clear agenda to overthrow the religious theocracy. It's an agenda inspired and enacted by its women, the most dynamic section of its society. Leading a popular resistance is a monumental task, to which Iran's women have risen after years of being suppressed. Achieving their goal has and will continue to demand heroic efforts, even after the forthcoming revolution. ❧

Notes

Ms. Sofey Saidi collaborated on the idea of this paper.

1. CNN International World News, 14 November 2002.
2. NCRI, Foreign Affairs Committee, "Iran Under Khatami, The Myth of Moderation," July 1998.
3. Articles from the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, Penal Code, Civil Code.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Elaine Sciolino, "Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran" (New York: New Press 2001): 134.
8. *Abrar*, Tehran Daily Newspaper (Translated), 8 February 8 1998.
9. Ibid.
10. Associated Press, 7 April 1997.
11. Tehran Radio, 31 July 1998.
12. International Labor Organization, quoted in *Bergens Tidende*, 12 July, 1997.
13. *Abrar*, Tehran Daily Newspaper (Translated), 2 December 1997.

14. IRNA, Islamic Republic News Agency, 8 May 1998.
15. Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Background Notes on Iran, December 2001. Available from Worldwide Web: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm>
16. SMCCDI, Student Movement Information Service, 2 November 2002.
17. Agence France Presse, 31 October 2002.
18. NGO Alternative Report on Iran, NCWDI. Available from Worldwide Web: <http://www.womenaction.org/global/ncwdi.htm>.
19. Agence France Presse, 30 October 2002.
20. *Abrar*, Tehran Daily Newspaper (Translated), 8 February 1998.
21. BBC Online, 28 July 2002.
22. Laila al-Marayati, "Discourse needed on Islam interpretation of rights," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 1998.
23. Nazila Fathi, "Regulate Prostitution, Iran Ponders Brothels," *New York Times*, 28 August 2002.
24. Translated Speech from First session of Islamic Conference in December of 1997.
25. Reuters News Agency, 14 November 2002.
26. Iran-Zamin News Agency, 13 November 2002.
27. "The Various Stages of Women's Emancipation in the National Liberation Army of Iran," remarks by Ms. Soraya Shahri, Frontline Feminist Conference, January 1997.
28. Agence France Presse, 31 October 2002.
29. NCRI, Foreign Affairs Committee, "Iranian Resistance, 1981 - Present," June 1997.
30. Iranian American Society of Texas, "Thousands of Lawmakers in US, Europe declare Support for Iranian Mojahedin as Solution to Islamic Fundamentalism, Terrorism," advertisement in *Washington Post*, 9 October 2002.
31. Radio Liberty, 14 November 2002.
32. Iran-Zamin News Agency, 11 November 2002.