

Women and the Presidential Elections: Iran's New Political Culture

Nayereh Tohidi writes in a guest op-ed for IC:

Iranian Women figured prominently in the 10th presidential elections of June 2009, in which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner by a wide margin. In large pre-election rallies and intense campaigns and during the post-election upheaval women played a visible and active role. Several internal conflicts within the ruling elites, including long-existing cracks within the ranks of the Shiite clerics and also between the people and the state came to the fore during and after the presidential elections. Women in large numbers joined the massive street protests that followed the vote, as opposition candidates and their supporters raised accusations of wholesale fraud in the official results and declared it an “electoral coup.”

The international media, often unaware of the brewing women’s movement in Iran, were surprised to see women marching in the demonstrations in large numbers and braving the violent response by security forces, which dramatically illustrated the clash between a changing society and an increasingly repressive government. But the massive participation of women in the latest protests is not an unprecedented, overnight development. This has been the result of many years of rather quiet educational and organizational work carried out by many small groups of women and men focused on civil rights, especially women’s rights. Women’s social activism and participation in political movements in modern Iran has more than 100 years of recorded history, with special highlights during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911, the nationalist movement of the 1950s, the modernization and reform processes of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79.[1]

What is unprecedented is not the massive quantity, but a new quality of women’s participation, which is marked by a high level of gender consciousness, self-confidence, and feminist agency. During the 1979 Revolution too, thousands of women, mostly covered in black veils, rallied behind Ayatollah Khomeini under a populist Islamist discourse envisioning a utopian and just Islamic society. But the current social uprising is neither revolutionary nor sectarian. It is a nonviolent and non-ideological pro-democracy movement in which demands for individual freedom and civil rights, including women’s rights, constitute its important components.

Women from all walks of life, but mostly young and urban middle class women, took part in both the electoral campaigns and in the protests against the results, which were widely viewed as being fraudulent. While some among these women participants were devout women covered in the traditional black chadors, many others appeared in colorful scarves, modern fashions, and secular looks. Unlike the demonstrations orchestrated by the government that we were used to seeing over the past 30 years, these rather spontaneous protests have not been sex segregated. Women marched not behind men, but alongside men or even in the forefront.

The nightly cries of “Allah-o-Akbar” (God is great) and “Death to the Dictator” on the roof tops are similar to those during the 1978–79 Revolution. Unlike then, however, the current movement is not dominated by

sectarian and revolutionary Islamism. Nor is the revolutionary Marxism-Leninism of the guerrilla movements of the 1970s present in the current movement. While a populist, religious fundamentalist (Islamist) and anti-imperialist discourse led by Ayatollah Khomeini was predominant in Iran in the 1970s, today a pluralist, and predominantly secular discourse based on human/women's rights, civil rights, and the democratic rule of law makes up the main framework of the current movement. By secular, I do not mean anti-religion or even irreligious, but an adherence to the separation of state and religion. This growing secular tendency in Iran rejects theocracy, the supremacy of the clerical power in politics, and the absolute rule of the jurist (*velayat-e motlaqeh faqih*) and aspires to create a secular republic based on free elections and parliamentary democracy. In other words, the dominant mindset in the current movement is post-Islamist and non-ideological.

Several inter-related and at times paradoxical factors have contributed to this evolutionary process. Among recent changes at the local and national levels in Iran are the demographic changes such as increased urbanization and the youth bulge in Iran's rising population; the dramatic increase in literacy and educational attainment, especially among women, who now make up 63 percent of university enrollment; the remarkable decline in fertility rates thanks to a successful campaign for birth control and family planning along with an improvement in primary health care; the rise in women's socio-political participation; and the increase in women's contribution to economic, scientific, and cultural production in the arts, literature, and cinema.

The interplay of these internal changes with certain changes at the international and global levels, especially the impact of globalizing factors such as the new communication technology (including the Internet, mobile phones, and satellite TV) and the global currency of human rights discourse and feminism promoted by the United Nations and by supportive devices such as CEDAW [2] that are being ratified by an increasing number of member states of the UN have all contributed to the transformations manifested in the current movement for democracy in Iran.

The socializing and politicizing impacts of the 1979 Revolution on women, especially on the traditional and conservative segments of women's population helped expand the size and influence of middle class women in Iranian society. Initially formed during the years of modernization under the Pahlavi dynasty in 1920s to 1970s, the modern middle class, urban women of Iran made up the core of the women's groups who resisted the discriminatory policies and laws enacted under the Islamist government since 1979.

They were later joined by an increasing number of Islamic women activists and devout Muslim women members of the traditionalist and conservative strata who gradually became disillusioned with the Islamist utopia and moved toward a reformist reconstruction of the polity and a feminist reinterpretation of their faith. This was due to their encounter with patriarchal injustices such as polygamy, temporary marriages, male privileges in divorce, child custody, and inheritance, and many other discriminatory laws and policies reinforced by the Islamic Republic. The increasing socioeconomic or class disparity, corruption, and particularly the government repression of individual freedoms and civil rights turned many female and male members of the younger generations away from the Islamist state.

Therefore, the youth, especially the student movement and the women's movement make up now the main forces of the current civil rights effort and constitute the primary agents of change and democratization in Iran.

Women's Role in the Election Process

Elections in Iran are neither free nor fair. People are allowed to choose only among a few candidates who have passed the screening process and been vetted by an unelected body called the Guardian Council.[3] It was only a few months before the June 12 elections that the overall mood shifted from political apathy and hopelessness to a sense of hope for change, which resulted in a vast mobilization to participate in voting. This was mainly due to the progressive platforms for change presented by the two reformist front-runners: Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi. What distinguished the reform candidates from the incumbent president Ahmadinejad was their promises to stop the latter's onslaught on civil rights, to improve the rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities, to mend the mismanaged economy (marked by 25 percent inflation and rising unemployment), and to change the hostile and confrontational foreign policy and militarization that have resulted in the UN resolutions against Iran, economic sanctions, and the threat of Western military attacks and war, which have created an overall sense of national insecurity and isolation.

Among women activists too, it took a while to overcome the widespread hesitance to engage in the electoral process, especially by those who had lost all hope for political reform and trust in any of the candidates. About three months before the Election Day, however, an increasing number of feminists and women's groups decided to take advantage of the relative openness of the political atmosphere during the election times in order to render an active feminist intervention into the process. They formed a diverse coalition called Convergence of Women (Hamgarayee Zanan) that represented 42 women's groups and 700 individual activists. The coalition pressed the presidential candidates on two specific sets of women's demands: ratification of CEDAW and revision of four Articles (19, 20, 21, and 115) in the constitution that enshrine gender-based discrimination.[4] Though as individuals, many feminists did take sides and voted for one of the two reform candidates, the coalition remained a demand-centered (*motalebeh-mehvar*) campaign only and avoided endorsement of any particular candidate. It rather put each candidate on the spot to address women's issues and respond to the demands specified by the coalition.

The coalition tried to bring women's issues to the surface through their publications and through appearances in the media, on the campaign trails and at street rallies, press conferences, and interviews with the candidates. They effectively utilized the new communication technology (SMS via cell phones, e-mails, and the Internet) to network and mobilize activists. Meanwhile, a film made by a prominent feminist director, Rakhshan Banietemad, put all of these efforts together in a documentary accessible on the Internet. The film included revealing interviews on women's issues with some prominent artists and the presidential candidates

while they were sitting along with their wives. Except for Ahmadinejad, the three other presidential candidates agreed to participate.

It should be noted that prior to the 2009 electoral campaigns, a new wave of women's collective activism had already brought women's demands for equal rights into the political scene. Following a growing trend in activities of women's press and women NGOs since 1998 and some street demonstrations in 2004 and 2005, a number of organized and focused collective campaigns took shape since 2006. The largest, most grassroots and influential one has been the One Million Signatures Campaign to change discriminatory laws.[5] Other campaigns and coalitions included: the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign; the Women for Equal Citizenship Campaign; the Women's Access to Public Stadiums Campaign; the National Women's Charter Campaign; and the Mothers for Peace.[6] Despite the peaceful and transparent nature of the Iranian women's movement, many women's activists have faced state repression such as smear campaigns by the state-run media, beating, and arrests by security forces. In the course of the five years prior to the presidential elections, over 70 women activists were arrested and taken to Evin Prison and charged with "disruption of public opinion," "propagating against the state", and "endangering of national security." While most of detainees were released on bail in a few weeks, some have been sentenced to several months or even several years of imprisonment.[7]

All of these efforts contributed to the visible changes in the gender politics of the 10th presidential election in 2009, which distinguished it from previous races. For one, all of the three candidates running against Ahmadinejad promised to address women's demands raised by the coalition and to also include woman ministers in their cabinets should they get elected. The front-runner candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was usually accompanied by his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, with whom he held hands—a bold and unprecedented act in the Iranian sex-segregated political culture. Rahnavard, a prominent Muslim woman activist, an accomplished writer, academic, and artist is the first woman to become a university president in Iran. Her stature, strong personality, outspokenness about human/women's rights, and colorful headscarf were among the traits that added to the appeal of this couple as a promising choice for change.

The other reform candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, also conducted a much more woman-friendly campaign than the one he ran in 2005 during the previous elections. Though a clergyman, his campaign team—composed of some respected reformers—included a prominent woman activist, Jamila Kadivar, as the spokesperson of his campaign headquarters. His wife, a strong professional woman, was also actively involved in the management of his campaign. Even the conservative candidate, Mohsen Rezai, was seen accompanied by his wife in several campaign meetings. Finally, Ahmadinejad himself felt compelled to bring along his wife during one of campaign events.

In short, both in symbolism and content, the 10th presidential elections signified considerable progress in gender politics in Iran. This progress has been mainly due to years of slow but persistent efforts by women toward consciousness-raising and feminist interventions in cultural and political arenas. As briefly mentioned above, in recent years, the women's rights movement in Iran has been manifested in feminist press (print

journals as well as online web logs and websites); arts, literature, and movies; organized and focused collective campaigns through networking; and other activities in various NGOs.[8]

Women's Role in the Post-Election Uprising

As discussed earlier, women's presence in the post-election Green Movement has been as prominent as the one in the election process. The prevalence of artistic images, songs, and poetry, especially the choice of the color green as the unifying symbol, gave the reform camp a sort of "feminine" tone. This rather spiritual, artistic, and peaceful mood that predominated because of the presence of many young people, especially young women, continued during the first days of protests in the aftermath of the election.

In the vote's aftermath, millions of marchers, while flashing victory signs (instead of clenched fists), carried green-colored banners with the slogan: "Where is My Vote?" This simple yet profound slogan signifies a prevalent keenness on civil and political rights. The color green signifies symbolism rooted in both the national Islamic and the secular, pre-Islamic mythology and poetry of Iran but also as the global color of peace, nonviolence and environmental protection.

Despite increasingly violent suppression, over 3000 arrests and around 60 deaths (according to official figures), the activists who are engaged in the Green Movement so far have remained, for the most part, non-violent. Women's roles as political actors, journalists, lawyers, and activist demonstrators are clearly evident in the increasing number of women who are beaten, injured, killed, or arrested as political prisoners since the June 12 upheavals.[9]

Even the first icon of the current civil rights movement is a woman: Neda Agha-Soltan, who was gunned down by the government-controlled militia while peacefully demonstrating. Her death was captured by a cell phone camera for all the world's eyes to see, and it turned her into a martyr, which inspired more demonstrations and the outrage that followed.

Neda's characteristics are representative of some of the demographic, gender, and class orientations of the current civil rights movement in Iran. Her young age (27 years old) reminds us of the 70 percent of Iran's population below age 30 who are faced with increasing rates of unemployment, socio-political repression, and humiliation should Ahmadinejad's repressive and militaristic policies continue for another four years. Neda's Azeri ethnic background reminds us of Iran's ethnic diversity and the ongoing tension between the center and peripheries over socioeconomic disparity, discrimination, and uneven distribution of power and resources. Neda's choice of field of study, theology and philosophy, was based on her quest to find answers to the questions of her time. But, as described by her mother, she became disappointed with the increasingly repressive atmosphere of the universities and so she turned to private training in music. Her music teacher was actually with her on the day of the protest (June 20, 2009) and was at her side when she was shot.[10] Neda belonged to no political party or ideological group. Her quest was basically for freedom and a democratic society that would respect her human rights and dignity as a woman.

Another icon of this movement, a 19 year-old male student, Sohrab Árabi, was reportedly killed while in the custody of the security forces. He became a rallying point mainly due to his mother's daring to speak out about her ordeal. Parvin Fahimi, who finally recovered the body of her son after three weeks of searching from one prison to another, has become a leading advocate of families of political prisoners and mothers of martyred activists who have formed a new women's group called Mothers in Mourning (Madaran-e Azadar).[11] To commemorate their lost children and also demand the release of the arrested ones, mothers of martyrs and political prisoners hold once-a-week rallies in designated public parks in Tehran. Following a call by Shirin Ebadi, a leading human rights lawyer and Nobel Laureate for Peace 2003, Iranian mothers in other parts of Iran and the world have begun holding similar rallies on a weekly basis as a show of global solidarity with women in Iran.

A Post-Islamist Paradigm Shift in Iran's Political Culture

The Green Movement is a home-grown product of a long quest for reform, democracy, and rule of law in Iran. Ironically, it emerged from within the former revolutionary Islamists disillusioned with totalitarian Islamism and was welcomed by many secular dissident groups who have suffered from years of repression and marginalization under the Islamist regime. This cracking from within is in part due to the internal contradictions embedded in the institutional hybrid called the "Islamic Republic." In the face of a growing movement for democracy and secular rule of law, the tense coexistence of its theocratic, unelected component (Islamic) with the elected popular authority (Republic) now seems untenable.

In the aftermath of what many called the "electoral coup," the state power is taken over by the increasingly powerful hard-line military (the Revolutionary Guard) and its conservative clerical allies. This alliance seems determined to erode the republican part of the IR hybrid regime and further consolidate its theocratic and unelected component as the real power. But new cracks along with the long-existing ones within the ranks of the Shii clerics seem to be deepening and multiplying. The post-election wave of repression; the violent crackdown on peaceful and legal demonstrations, torture, show trials and lies, and the revelation of cases of rape and sexual abuse of the political prisoners have expanded people's distrust of and resentment toward the government, hence a legitimacy crisis for the regime.

Ahmadinejad was the only one among the four candidates running for presidency who made no mention of women's issues in his platform. His first term of presidency too was not only negligent of women's demands but also associated with more retrogressive gender policies such as the proposition of the infamous "Family Bill" in 2008 to facilitate polygamy. Yet, at the beginning of his second term in August 2009, Ahmadinejad surprised many by announcing the nomination of three women to his new cabinet as ministers of education, health, and welfare and social security. This move, unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic, was unexpected and will probably prove unacceptable by his conservative allies, especially the clerics in Qum and may not receive enough votes of approval in the Majlis (parliament).

His opponents, on the other hand, women's rights activists in particular, see this move as a sheer hypocrisy and a deceptive political show. This, they argue, displays Ahmadinejad's desperate attempt to appease women who have become his main challengers. Furthermore, the hardliner background of the nominated women indicates that Ahmadinejad is planning to instrumentally use these women against the women's rights movement. Though highly educated, all the three nominated women have very negative records concerning women's rights. They have played active roles in support of anti-women legislations such as the notorious "Family Bill" and in opposition to progressive reforms.

Iran's situation remains fluid as new developments unfold. The prospect for women's rights, especially in the medium and long terms, seems to be promising and hopeful. The growing quest for democracy is finally becoming intertwined with women's rights. This is indicative of a paradigm shift in Iran's political culture and intellectual discourse. In the background of the latest changes in gender politics in Iran, even Ahmadinejad would feel compelled to show some positive gestures in his gender policies. But with the numerous women activists arrested, beaten, imprisoned, and some even killed under his presidency, he can hardly convince people of his good intention toward improvement of women's status.[12]

The main subject of discussion among the Iranian advocates of women's rights at present is how to integrate women's demands with the broader quest for reform and democracy in the face of the increasing repression. They are seeking ways to continue rendering a feminist intervention in the current democracy movement in order to assure its direction is toward a nonviolent, nonsectarian, pluralistic, and egalitarian future. This is a daunting struggle, yet also an exciting and inspiring process, from which global feminism, especially women activists in Muslim communities, can learn many new lessons.

NOTES

[1] For studies on the history of the women's movement in Iran, see for instance: Eliz Sanasarian. *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Parvin Paidar. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nikki Keddie. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Janet Afary. *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Nayereh Tohidi. "The International Connections of the Women's Movement in Iran: 1979-2000" in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interaction in Culture and Cultural Politics*, edited by Nikki Keddie and Rudi Mathee (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 205-231.

[2] CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Currently, 185 countries - over ninety percent of the members of the United Nations - are party to the Convention. During the reform oriented presidency of Mohamad Khatami (1997-2005), CEDAW was passed in parliament in 2003, albeit with several reservations. But the Guardian

Council blocked its ratification and the final decision was left upon another body, the Expediency Council. The latter has kept it shelved since then and the hardliners in power have not even tried to reconsider this convention.

[3] The Guardian Council is composed of six clerics appointed by the unelected supreme leader and six jurists selected by the head of the judiciary for approval by the Majlis. This powerful body vets legislation, political candidates and election results.

[4] For information on this coalition see: <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article2461>

[5] Visit their Web sites at: <http://www.sign4change.info/english/spip.php?article18>
<http://zanschool.net/english/spip.php?rubrique3>

[6] For more information and documentation on these campaigns, see Nayereh Tohidi "The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran: A Glocal Perspective," in *Women's Movements in a Global Era* edited by Amrita Basu, Westview Press, forthcoming, and also Rochelle Terman, "The Contemporary Iranian Women's Rights Movement," *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, (forthcoming).

[7] See, for example:

<http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?rubrique5>

<http://www.meydaan.com/english/default.aspx>

[8] For some analysis by women activists inside Iran about the role of women's movement in the current uprising see, for example:

Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Ten Days that Shook Iran," July 30, 2009:

<http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?article322>

Asal Akhavan "Three Years after the Campaign of One Million Signatures," July 2009:

<http://www.sign4change.info/spip.php?article4554>

[9] On arrested women activists and the conditions of women prisoners, see the following report by Shadi Sadr, a prominent feminist lawyer written after her own release from Evin prison:

<http://www.meydaan.com/Showarticle.aspx?arid=883>

For more information on imprisoned women journalists and other activists, see:

[http://wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd\[157\]=x-157-565012](http://wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd[157]=x-157-565012)

[10] See the witness report at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8119713.stmn>

[11] Visit their Web site at: <http://www.mournfulmothers.blogfa.com/>

[12] See, for example, the following commentaries by women activists against Ahmadinejad's appointment of women to his cabinet: Massoumeh Torfeh, "Hardline women won't help Iran" in Guardian, 17 August 2009:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/aug/17/iran-cabinet-women>

Nahid Tavassoli. "Entekhab Vazir Zan, chera Hala?" [Election of Women Ministers, Why Now?]: <http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article3065>

Mahboubeh Abassgholizadeh. "Sexist Views of the Head of the Government": <http://meydaan.info/wwShow.aspx?wwid=1605>

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The election is not expected to hold much intrigue, with Iran's judiciary chief and close ally of Khamenei, Ebrahim Raisi, projected to secure a solid win. Hardliner Raisi also ran in 2017, losing by a wide margin of almost 20% to the incumbent president, Rouhani, who is barred from running again due to legal limitations allowing two consecutive four-year terms, which he has already served. Raisi is already the subject of sanctions imposed on Iran by Washington. The decisions of the council against some of the presidential hopefuls were criticized by Khamenei himself. The supreme leader said some of the disqualifications were unjust, urging the panel to reverse some of the decisions. "Some candidates were wronged. Iranian women emerged as a force of change in 1997 after they voted overwhelmingly for Mohammad Khatami, bringing to power a reformist cleric. Although candidates and political parties have issued plans to improve their status to win their votes, women have seen little improvement in their rights at home and in society. Many see the country's civil code and constitution, which were written based on Islamic Law after the revolution, as the source of discrimination. Nevertheless, women's role in the presidential elections on June 18 remains crucial. Will they vote and who will they vote for? What are their concerns? Iranian women cast their vote at a polling station during the presidential election in Tehran, Iran. Photograph: Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA. Hemmati, the only non-conservative on the ballot who was seen as the main ideological challenger, arguably did not have enough time in the brief three-week campaign to shape his appeal or an attack on Raisi. Iran's president-elect, Ebrahim Raisi, is hardliner linked with mass executions. Read more. Iranian officials insisted throughout the election campaign that an internal consensus existed on the country's negotiating stance, and Raisi's elevation will not change that position. Iran's next president will ride a wave of voter apathy into power | Holly Dages. Read more. Forty women applied but none were approved by the Council which is made up of 12 members, half of whom senior clerics, and headed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. EU should step out from US shadow, says Iran's ex-president Ahmadinejad. In 2017 he lost the presidential elections against Hassan Rouhani, earning 15 million votes and was later appointed as the head of the country's judiciary system. Controversially, he was involved in the 1988 mass execution of thousands of political prisoners. B. Abdolnasser Hemmati, 64, was head of Iran's Central Bank under Rouhani and during the American sanctions after the Nuclear Deal crisis. You might also like. Serious age gap between the people who lead Iran and the population, says professor. Iranians are due to choose a new president this month at a pivotal time for the country, both at home and abroad. Much has changed in the four years since the last election - and here are key reasons why this one will be closely watched. Growing dissatisfaction. Since the last presidential election in 2017, a series of events has drastically changed the Iranian political landscape. They include deadly crackdowns on anti-government protests; arrests of political and social activists, executions of political prisoners; the shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner by Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC); and a severe economic crisis as a result of US sanctions. Protesters demanded the resignation of members of Iran's ruling elite and the government. Similar protests could erupt again.