

The Emperor Has No Clothes

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Abstract

Today Iran is moving beyond the 1979 revolution embodied by a religious-secular binary; we are witnessing the children of the revolution's retrieval through very modern cyber-methods of the moral legitimacy of the Iranian 'cause'. Yet paradoxically, many who are fighting an Islamic state have chosen 'Allah-o-Akbar' or 'God is great' as their battle cry. This is a new generation that has largely responded to tyrannical violence with democratic nonviolence, yet which calls those killed on its protests Shahids (Islamic martyrs), much to the annoyance of religious and secular elders.

Biography

Nasrin Alavi is the author of *We Are Iran*² (Portobello Books, 2006), which has been translated into a number of languages. More recently she has contributed to *The People Reloaded* "The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future"³ (2011 Melville House Publishing). She has written for publications including the *Financial Times Magazine*, *The Times*, *The Independent* and *Private Eye*, in addition to writing for non-English language publications such as Spain's *La Vanguardia* and Germany's *Das Parlament*. She is a regular contributor to *OpenDemocracy on Iran*⁴ and has written extensively for *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*⁵ (Germany's Federal Agency for Civic Education).

The Emperor Has No Clothes

An Iranian blogger writes: "The child said: The emperor has no clothes. The anti-riot forces rushed in and the tear gas filled the air."⁶

It is no secret that most of the rulers in the Middle East are at odds with their youth, and Iran is no exception. Those who lived through the Iranian Revolution of 1979 are now a minority. Every two out of three people you see on the streets is likely to be under thirty.

I compiled a book about the early years of Iran's vibrant blogosphere, *We Are Iran*. At the time these blogs largely mirrored the uncensored banter you would hear around campuses echoing the voices of a post-war (that is, the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88) baby boom generation that will determine the future of their country (hence the title *We Are Iran*).

Following a contested presidential election in June 2009, Iran saw the largest street protests in 30 years of the Islamic republic. The hashtag #iranelection dominated the micro-blogging site Twitter and even inspired a worldwide solidarity campaign. The voice of a nation's

² For more information and reviews of this title see: <http://www.portobellobooks.com/page/3032/We-Are-Iran/6489> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

³ A new book by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel available at: <http://mhpbooks.com/book.php?id=493> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

⁴ See profile and list of article at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/author/nasrin-alavi> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

⁵ http://www.bpb.de/suche/?all_search_action=search&all_search_text=%22nasrin+Alavi%22&url_dossier_search=bbp [Accessed 17 April 2011]

⁶ See http://be-kasi-nagoo.blogspot.com/2011/02/blog-post_21.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+bekasi+%28%D8%A8%D9%87+%DA%9%D8%B3%DB%8C+%D9%86%DA%AF%D9%88%29&utm_content=FriendFeed+Bot [Accessed 17 April 2011]

resistance was heard in the real-time YouTube footage of protests, and the deluge of tweets and blog reportage.

The New Islamic Rebels

The Huffington Post hailed the micro-blogger @persiankiwimm⁷, --with over 35000 followers— as "one of the most reliable and prolific Iranians on Twitter". Most of his readers could understand his non-violent fight for democratic rights, but perhaps many failed to notice that his posts were threaded with verses from the Koran. Paradoxically those choosing to fight an Islamic state have chosen the Islamic battle cry "Allah-o-Akbar" or 'God is great' that has been heard in every "Green" protest since.

Twenty-seven-year-old Golshifteh Farahani is widely recognised as one of Iran's most prominent and talented actresses of her generation. In a song in tribute to the green movement, she breaks every theological rule in the book. Women singing solo before a male audience is considered un-Islamic in Iran and has been banned since 1979. She sings "kiss me for the last time, as I go forth towards my destiny, I utter Allah-o-Akbar, for the dreams I behold in my head". Golshifteh's song went viral within days of it being posted during February 2011 on YouTube.⁸

This is a song for a new contradictory generation that has largely confronted tyrannical violence with democratic nonviolence, while it calls the fatalities of its protests Islamic shahids or martyrs; much to the mutual annoyance of its religious and secular elders.

New Shahids

Such dissent has been met with a brutal state crackdown that includes mass arrests -- with those targeted ranging from senior ex-state politicians to vulnerable religious minorities -- Stalinist-style show-trials, systematic violations of prisoners' rights, drenching media propaganda and the killing of unarmed street-protestors.

The fallen are a new generation's martyrs. Google their names in Farsi and they come up continually with the Islamic prefix shahid. Philosophy student, "Shahid Neda" Soltan, whose fatal shooting was captured and distributed by camera phone and has been viewed millions of times online. Or 26-year-old doctor, Shahid Ramin Pour'andarjani, who died of poisoning after his refusal to sign falsified death certificates at the Kahrizak detention centre. Or the 19-year-old, Shahid Mohsen Ruholamini, a member of the conservative student basij who died in the very same centre after protesting against election fraud.

The films, images, tweets and blogs that are cast out like messages-in-bottles across the cyber-waves are a central part of people's struggle to narrate their own stories and present a case for justice.

Also in existence are thriving cyberspace-memorials to the fallen that further belie the Western media cliché of an Iran where political affiliations neatly divide along class lines and discontentment is limited to the urban upper class.

⁷ <http://twitter.com/persiankiwi> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HLL_l2rysk [Accessed 17 April 2011]

Many of those arrested or killed have been young accomplished students who represent a growing population that is educated and ambitious, jobless and discouraged, stifled and angry. At the same time, a large number of fatalities are from Ahmadinejad's purported working class support base. They include 20-year-old Bahman Jenabi, an apprentice plumber; 20-year-old Sajjad Ghaed Rahmati, a casual labourer; 34-year-old Moharram Chegini, an office clerk from one of the poorest neighbourhoods of south Tehran; 27-year-old Saeed Abbasi, a shoe-shop assistant shot in front of his father on Salsabil Street; and 16-year-old Meysam Ebadi, a tailor's apprentice shot in the stomach as he tried to rescue a young woman being beaten by riot police (and whose father was taunted by authorities who questioned why his son was in north Tehran so far from the family home).

Old Shahids

"My throat smells of hot lead, father. The Baathist hit you with two bullets. They... every day, Shoot me in the mouth". These are the words of Fatemeh⁹ who like hundreds of thousands of Iranians lost a family member in the epic Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 that was launched by Saddam Hussein.

These fallen occupy a special place in the Islamic Republic of Iran's political and moral iconography: almost every official speech on a national theme refers to the sacred blood of "martyrs" who - like Fatemeh's father - are forever exalted. But this is not an innocent act, for it involves a posthumous conscription of their loyalty: to the revolution of 1979, to Islam, to the Islamic Republic's leaders.

Yet today in the ranks of the "green" movement that gathered around Mir-Hossein Mousavi are the children of these very revolutionary icons, such as Mehdi Zeinadin, Mohammad-Ebrahim Hemmat, and the brothers Mehdi and Hamid Bakeri. It seems that even the children of "martyrs" - often hailed as the "protectors of the revolution" -- are now trying to remember history differently in order to create a different future.

At the age of 26, Mohammad-Ali Jahanara commanded ordinary townsfolk of Khorramshahr who acted as a border town buffer. They fought against the Iraqi army invasion of their town inch-by-inch for 45 days before it fell to the enemy. A common tweet in the post-election period read: "Tell Jahanara the Baathist are in Tehran, they are firing on our girls".

Memorial of the fallen

Twenty months after the "stolen elections" on Valentine's Day February 14; no sooner had Iranian protesters taken to the streets than activists began flooding cyberspace with footage of misty teargas-filled scenes of fury and solidarity.

Citizen journalists were once again narrating their own stories. The YouTube footage made the chants that resounded during Tehran's post-election rallies in 2009 ("where is my vote?") appear to belong to a remote past. The stakes had been raised, dangerously so for an Islamic Republic forced by the depth of internal opposition to exist in an existential condition of high alert. The chanting YouTube soundtrack of the new protests targeted the Supreme Leader himself, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei: "Mubarak, Ben Ali, now it's the turn of Seyyad Ali!"¹⁰

⁹ Reference withheld for security concerns for the author

¹⁰ See clip at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=resdmP5s_F4&feature=player_embedded [Accessed 17 April 2011]

If cyberspace is a channel of dissent, it is also a permanent memorial of the fallen in the ongoing political contest. That day left hundreds behind bars and two students, Mohammad Mokhtari (22) and Saneh Zhaleh (25) dead. Yet not only were both hailed as shahids by the state media, Zhaleh was given a funeral where he was honoured as a member of the Basij who had died fighting “seditionists”.

State media claims of Saneh’s basij membership were denied by his brother who was arrested, following a telephone interview with Voice of America. Meanwhile Saneh's friends and lecturers at Tehran Art University – many of whom were also arrested during the day of his “fake funeral” – published numerous online accounts of a young artist, with modest provincial roots, a student opposition activist with dreams of becoming a filmmaker like his hero Bahman Ghobadi.

One blogger wrote “[As Iranians] always say an egg thief will steal your camel too, we now have to say that the vote thief will steal your shahid too.”¹¹

Another, with typical Iranian trench humour, shared a threat she had received from a parent about going out on further protests. She told her online readers¹² “Mother says: ‘if you go and become a shahid tomorrow, I’ll give them your photo and tell them that you were a member of the Basij, I’ll say you were a diehard. Now you know best.’”

No Khomeini or Che

Mohammad Mokhtari, left behind a personal online narrative too. His heartbreaking Facebook page bursts with a joyous mix characteristic of this Iranian generation - at once politically and pop-culturally aware, modern and traditional, discontented and hopeful.¹³

You would search his Facebook page in vain for any sign of the ideological revolutionary hero-worship of his parent’s generation; there is no sign of a Khomeini or Che.

The melange includes Mohammad’s loving praise of his football heroes (Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Lionel Messi), and photos of him in the company of friends or carrying banners at an Ashura (Shi’a) ceremony in December 2010. There is also a link to footage of an Egyptian protestor shot dead only days earlier. The last message wishes friends a happy Valentine’s Day, accompanied by an ominous note: “Dear God, help me die standing, for I despise a life sitting humiliated”. Hours later, Mohammad was killed.

Tahkim-e Vahdat, Iran’s oldest student union, has attacked the state’s appropriation of the fallen. They put out a statement saying the “tyrants and their collaborators have merely hung the bloodied gowns of our martyrs of freedom on their flagpoles of disgrace”.¹⁴

Iran’s largest national student union was formed after a decree by Ayatollah Khomeini urging the expulsion of liberal and leftwing student groups from campuses. But things have moved on: today, it is banned and has become one of the most vocal critics of the state. Yet no hard-line Islamic student group has been able to replace it by gaining control of any Iranian campus in the land through free elections. Thirty years after the Revolution the state

¹¹ Link not published as it may prove dangerous for the writer

¹² Link not published as it may prove dangerous for the writer

¹³ Link not published due to security concerns for the family of the deceased

¹⁴ <http://www.sahamnews.net/?p=17047> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

is grappling with its own demographic “success” and does not seem to know how to come to terms with one of the youngest and most educated populations in the region.

Double-Edged Cyberwar

Iranian blogger opium tells us “Islamic Republic: here to be a man is a crime and a woman a sin”.¹⁵ Only time will tell if cyberspace is merely a place for the beleaguered to blow off steam or a modern day Gutenberg press that would usher in an age of democracy. As the vast cyberspace remains a mere tool without intrinsic value, part of the problem is that although it gives the opposition in Iran a chance to be heard and to mobilise, it also equips the state with the power to monitor, track, disrupt, confuse and arrest critics. In the post-election security onslaught, the personal computers of imprisoned activists were confiscated and their email correspondence used in endless hours of interrogation. The revolutionary courts then cited the resulting “evidence” when handing down lengthy prison sentences for the crime of “instigating war against God”.

Commander of Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Ali, asserts that Iran is in “a state of online soft-war” that is “more dangerous than a military confrontation”. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has called on “young soldiers” to confront those “spreading lies and rumours, doubt and divisions among the nation.”

But even in the segments of Iranian blogosphere championed by the state, the medium has proved its capacity to be liberating and it is filled with calls for accountability. In a recent example many young conservative bloggers have taken Ahmadinejad to task, outraged at the allegations of high-level corruption against First Vice President Mohammad-Reza Rahimi.

The state is heavily investing in cyber-political-combat. The majles (parliament) has provided a \$500 million budget for cyberwarfare; lavish “cyberwar” conferences are held that “reveal” the reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami to be a “freemason”; emerging groups like the “Basij cyber committee” boast of training “1,500 active bloggers engaged in battle”.

Yet the online grandstanding can take ludicrous forms; the official Fars news agency claimed that an article on France24.com about Ahmadinejad's speech at the United Nations general assembly in September 2010 reaped 2.2 billion reader comments - the true figure,¹⁶ France 24 pointed out, was thirty-one.

A growing band of well-staffed and funded news agencies spew out the archetypal worldview of a mighty nation conspired against by global Iran-obsessed enemies (one story even asserts that the rescue of the trapped Chilean miners was a Zionist conspiracy to undermine Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Lebanon).

The Enemy Within

Yet even a paranoid person can have real enemies - and delights in conjuring more from its delusions. Three decades of sanctions and suspicion from the west have nurtured revolutionary Iran's sense of siege. The regime uses every particle of hostility to blame any domestic problem or upheaval on foreign powers, the United States and Britain above all. It

¹⁵ Link not published as it may prove dangerous for the writer

¹⁶ <http://observers.france24.com/content/20101004-france-24-article-ahmadinejad-speech-gets-22-billion-comments-says-teheran> [Accessed 17 April 2011]

is skilled too in sustaining the alarmist message that internal enemies are in the pay of, or serving the interests of, these nefarious outsiders.

One blogger mockingly asks if there is anyone “around to give me an exact address; the place where America and the west pay out dollars and Euros for rioting and turning up on the streets... Especially with Eid¹⁷ coming up I can go and get some money and heal a few pains. I’ve fallen back on all my loan repayments.”¹⁸

As another puts it, “A dictator is a dictator, it doesn’t matter if he's America's Friend like [Hosni] Mubarak or America's enemy like Gaddafi. People hate dictators.”¹⁹

Three decades after the Revolution, Iran has become the only country in the Middle East where people do not have the luxury of blaming an American-backed leadership for the tyranny, corruption, mismanagement, waste and daily hardship that blights their lives. If there is one larger political truth in Iran today it is that the children of the 1979 Revolution, in their non-violent fight for civil rights, are demanding that we Iranians should hold ourselves accountable for our failures and successes.

Iranian society is no longer what it was. Those who once believed no longer do; those who claim still to believe are fast losing credibility; those who never believed have no reason to. But the future lies with those born later: the countless educated young people with whom the regime can no longer afford to pick fights that it will inevitably lose.

¹⁷Eideh Noruouz- Iranian New Year

¹⁸ Link not published as it may prove dangerous for the writer

¹⁹ Link not published as it may prove dangerous for the writer