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THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

Youth, Gender, and Islam in Iran

By Roland Gawlitta

(3998 words)

The demographic change in the Islamic Republic of Iran, induced by the large increase of population over the last few decades, resulted in an inevitable generational conflict. According to estimates by several sources, approximately 70 percent of the Iranian population is under 30 years old.[1] The age of the people in power, however, differs significantly. Questions arise whether the conservative platform, grounded in the ideas established during the Iranian Revolution, is still an appropriate starting point to look at social matters and whether the current regime is able to legitimately represent the moral stance of the majority of the population. Protest activities like the One Million Signatures Campaign of 2006 or Rouhani's election suggest otherwise. Young Iranians grow up under different circumstances today and many of them do not share the beliefs of their parents and grandparents. Even if the leaders try to shield the youth from outside influences, the media and computer literate generation, who enjoys a significantly better education than their parents, is able to circumvent these obstacles. What they demand includes some of the core values of Western societies: civil liberties, freedom of expression and equal rights for both men and women – rights that have been curtailed in the making of the Islamic Republic to conform to the revolutionaries' interpretation of the Qur'an.

[1] These estimates might be contested, since there is no census data to validate this assertion. The general consensus of several sources is, however, that approximately two-thirds of the population is under 30. See for example: Alavi 2006: 5, http://www.payvand.com/news/09/feb/1147.html , http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iran/facts.html , http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/youth

However, this does not mean that reform efforts are only furthered by secularists. For many people, Islam is still a crucial component in life, but it is how this piety is expressed and redefined based on modern, gender neutral standards which make the difference. This paper will provide a short historical context of protest movements, especially among women, since the Constitutional Revolution to create the foundation to explore the relationship of Islam and gender politics in Iran and its consequences for the behavior and activism of the mostly urban youth. How is Islam interpreted by the younger generation and on what grounds do they argue for reform? What are the ways to circumvent oppression within the confines of the strict Islamic regime and how does the state authority react to these protests? How is the widespread discontent reflected in culture, media, and religious rituals? Finally, what role does the steady development of technological infrastructure, the access to internet, and social media, play in these youth movements?

Resistance against current regimes is not a concept new to the Iranian people. Before the protest movements in recent years, there was the Islamic Revolution of 1979, obviously, but also the Persian Constitutional Revolution which has resulted in the establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy in 1906. At this time, it was women of all ages who fought for individual rights, paving the way for progressive women's associations and political clubs involved in social and political activities, education and print media (Khorasani 2009: 35). This time has spawned among others the 'Society for the Freedom of Women', or the 'Underground Union of Women'. (Alavi 2006: 160). However important Islam was for the Revolution in 1979, it was not merely a matter of faith. It was equally concerned with the demanding and preserving of egalitarian rights, just as it was concerned with religion and economic stability. It was a popular revolution and both men and women participated to overthrow the

corrupt regime of the Shah (Haeri 2009: 129). For some people, the success of the revolution did not mean the end of resistance, for they felt betrayed by their revolutionary leaders. It was Khomeini revoking the women's right to vote and repealing the Family Rights Act that sparked first criticism (Khorasani 2009: 141). The reintroduction of mandatory hijab in March 1979 further intensified protest.[2] (Alavi 2006: 25) During the Pahlavi regime, a few Shia women ignored the ban on Islamic dress and wore the veil as a sign of a common Muslim identity as well as to distinguish them from the regime and its secularist ideology. Yet, they were against the obligation of Islamic dress either, since for many the purpose of the revolution was to move back from secular or religious compulsion, emphasizing the right to choose. Khomeini's call for an increased population drastically changed the demographic balance, which resulted in the high number of young people compared to the revolutionary old guard as we see it today. The universal access to primary education which was supposed to help forming a pious Islamic society, however turned the broadly literate youth into a highly politicized entity, disillusioned by high unemployment rates among young adults, unjust distribution of wealth, and a per-capita income that even supersedes pre-revolutionary conditions (Alavi 2006: 146-7). The level of support for the regime decreased simultaneously with the significance of Muslim rituals like the Friday prayers at the mosque. Islamic values were linked to the state with its rigid religious dogmas and its failure to address real-life problems (Tezcür, Azadarmaki 2008: 217-8).

The opposition to the religion of the ruling clergy does not mean a total departure from Islam, but reveals the diverging opinions of a just implementation of Muslim ideas. One important figure of the resisting school of thought is Ali Shariati,

[2] Veiling was enforced shortly after the Revolution, the actual law that mandates hijab for women passed in 1983 (Mir-Hosseini 2002: 42)

whose advocacy of equality, fraternity, justice, and liberation were dismissed by leading clerics of the revolution (Rahnema 2005: 213). The point of the revolution was to stop taqlid, the blind obedience of religious authority. According to Rahnema, Shariati believed that “Islam was based on democracy, expressed in shura and ijma’ along with the freedom of thought and expression canonized in the concept of ijtihad and finally the freedom of religion” (Rahnema 2005: 230). Muhammad-Ali Abtahi, reformist cleric and former Vice President under Khatami, concurs:

> *An interpretation by past generation of Islamic scholars is not Islam. It was their account of Islam; just as they had the right to understand the Koran, from a personal perspective – we have the same right. Their understanding of Islam is not an absolute diktat of faith for us.* (Alavi 2006: 100)

Many critics and clerics still see themselves as pious, and they value Islamic ideals, but they refuse to accept oppressive policies in the name of Islam; it is not Islam per se, but the ruling party’s interpretation of the Qur’an that is problematic (Tezcür, Azadarmaki 2008: 216). So how do young Iranians perform Islam nowadays? Where is the difference between them and the old guard and on what basis is their activism grounded on? To answer this question, I will look closely into the festivities linked to the Shia holiday Ashura.

Resistance and what Stephen Kinzer calls “thirst for just leadership, of which they have enjoyed precious little” is a theme that has pervaded Iranian history from its beginning and has its roots in the Shia faith (Kinzer in: Alavi 2006: 123-4). The Shia have always played a special role in the Muslim community. Out of the early political marginalization of the Shia by the Sunni as a result of being outnumbered and stigmatized as heretics in most of the Islamic world, arose a narrative of the victimization of this Muslim denomination. This dialectic of the mustazifen

(oppressed) versus the mustakberin (oppressors) is not only viable on a global level with the ancient Shia Persian empire standing in stark juxtaposition with the Sunni dominated Arab empire, but also applicable on a local level (Norton 2005: 185). The symbolic incarnation of Shia persecution is the martyrdom of Imam Husain, the rightful successor of Prophet Muhammad according to Shia faith and icon for the deprived.

The commemoration of his martyrdom, which is a symbol for both the Shia marginalization and the call to political activism to overcome said marginalization (as opposed to quietist acceptance of fate), is celebrated annually on the anniversary of Husain's defeat on Ashura, the tenth day in the month Muharram (Norton 2005: 190). In Iran, this ritual has been appropriated according to Iranian custom and current circumstances for several reasons. Iran's declining religiosity would suggest that this would also decrease the willingness to attend traditional Ashura ceremony, and this might even be the case when looking at the daily business of many Iranians. However, the occasion of the reappropriated Ashura has increasingly become an important event for many young Iranians. Even if they might not be as traditionally religious as their parents or grandparents, Imam Husain is respected and celebrated by many enemies of the regime for his willingness to speak out against an unjust ruler. It is ironic that the revolutionaries who have been evoking this theme of being the oppressed for their agenda are now in the position of being the oppressors and that the youth started to turn the tables by using this narrative for them by glorifying a Shia saint against the Shia authority. To distinguish themselves from the strictly Islamic customs, they disregard Islamic law and infuse their celebrations with intrinsically Persian or modern idiosyncrasies which are deemed sacrilegious by the Islamic administration. These include mixing sexes, dressing up, and lighting up vigil

candles for Husain (Alavi 2006: 125-6). The use of vigil candles, moreover, emphasizes Persian national pride and history, symbolizing the resistance against Arab rule and the imposition of Islam on the Persian Empire (Kinzer in: Alavi 2006: 129). These "Husain parties" are in stark contrast to regular commemorations (Sadeghi 2010: 286). Young Iranians distance themselves from tradition and give Ashura a new, instrumental meaning, making it a meeting place to meet members of the opposite sex or anti-regime rallies, even if this often resolves in violent clashes with the Hezbollah or the Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia which is enforcing Islamic ethics as a 'morality police', their justification being the Islamic tenet of 'commanding the good, forbidding the evil' (Khatam 2010: 211, 215). These events are not about mourning; they are not about "self-abasement", but rather about "self-assertion" (Khosravi 2008: 145). Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, an Iranian secular writer notes: "I have never witnessed such an Ashura… It's as if we distant from this generation, we don't understand them" (in: Alavi 2006: 125). Many older Iranians are confused about these new developments, given their sometimes parodying character, but as Robert Stam argues, "parody […] is especially well suited to the needs of oppositional culture, precisely because it deploys the force of the dominant discourse against itself" (in: Khosravi 2008: 145).[3] Resistance expressed in rituals raises the question, what other forms of defiance can be detected in the Iranian youth? For this I will look at the diverging opinions towards the mandatory hijab and the One Million Signature Campaign.

One of the most visible battlefields of resistance against oppression is the mandatory hijab, which was reintroduced after the Iranian Revolution and since then subject to criticism in Iran.

[3] There is no statistical data on how widespread these 'Husain parties' are. However, they tend to be well known in the urban areas. For different accounts on these festivities, see Alavi 2006, Khosravi 2008, Sadeghi 2010, Yaghmaian 2002.

> *And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes' and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to [those relatives who fall within bounds of close relationship explained in the Qur'an]* (Qur'an Chapter 24, Verse 31)

This excerpt from the Qur'an has been subject of a lot of discussion in the Muslim community. It is clear that the Qur'an is promoting modesty of dress in believing Muslim to maintain moral integrity in its community, so it would not 'endanger Islam'. However, it also leaves many questions open for interpretation. On what grounds can a state legitimately impose a law on veiling on its whole population? The Qur'an is not really specific on what parts of the female body are supposed to be covered by the veil. In fact, this particular interpretation[4] only states that women's private parts are needed to be covered completely. There is no mention of necks, hair, or ears (Shirazi 2009: 190). Furthermore, how can this compulsion be justified in non-believing women? There are many positions concerning the hijab. This makes it difficult, of course, to generalize the findings on the whole population (Abdollah Nuri[5] in: Mir-Hosseini 2002: 44).

One common theme, especially among Islamic women in Western countries is the hijab, as an indicator of Muslim identity (Shirazi 2009: 189). It is also serves as a symbol of superiority against the West and its tendencies to objectify the female body (Alavi 2006: 169). It is interesting to note that, according to more feminist interpretations, the original introduction of mandatory veil to preserve moral integrity

[4] The word in question is *Juyubihinna*, which can either be interpreted as just 'bosoms' (like in most of the common interpretations), or as 'bodies, faces, necks and bosoms'. See http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=24&verse=31 for the common interpretations.

[5] Abdollah Nuri was Interior Minister under Khatami and was later tried for this and other statements deemed to be blasphemous.

may have actually evolved from men's inability to abstain from staring at women and therefore threatening their own morality, and not from the incompetence of women to dress properly (Shirazi 2009: 193). This development is thus less a manifestation of a religious duty, but more of a patriarchal society which is putting the blame on women. Obviously, many Iranian women do not want to accept this condition and constantly try to challenge the authorities with their unwillingness to adhere to moral codes. The hijab becomes a symbol, not just for the obligation to wear the headscarf, but more implicitly for the fight against gender inequality and against patriarchal power structures that are evident in the limited job opportunities or the access to public spaces. Protest movements like the One Million Signature Campaign in 2006 take a peaceful stance against gender-based discrimination, like "'honor' killings, sexual violence, and debasement they tolerate and even promote" (Khorasani 2009: 11, 37). The strategy of "street politics" and raising awareness in face-to-face conversations has expanded the appeal of this movement, making it a popular movement among men and women (Khorasani 2009: 41, 51). The result was the successful pressure to revise legislation that would further undermine women's rights in marriage and divorce law (Khorasani 2009: 166).

Other Iranian women are trying to test the authorities by minimizing their covering, yet by staying within legal limits to avoid serious reprimands. They turn their obligation into fashion. "Fearless to challenge injustice", they attempt to emulate Zaynab, a role model for Muslim women, intrumentalizing the veil, using it as a tool to gain access to places, where women were not welcome before the reintroduction of the hijab – higher education, public office. Not wearing the hijab would only deny them to do anything. On the other hand, the obligation to wear the headscarf in public legitimized the presence of many women in the public sphere and in schools,

especially in orthodox families who would not have granted their daughters education otherwise (Alavi 2006: 210). Again, this is neither just an issue about covering themselves or about secularism; their critique concerns the inequality of opportunity due to a patriarchal, textual interpretation of the Qur'an (Haeri 2009: 132-4). For them, the hijab is unnecessary if not worn voluntarily and consciously. Just as many Iranian women are opposed to the imposition of the veil as there are who are against the total ban, as seen in France. The goal is an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an (Alavi 2006: 208). The term "quiet encroachment" fits best to characterize the practice of the so-called misveiled (badhijab), who try to loosen the actual enforcement of morality by the Basij with their gradual adjustment of behavior into a more modern direction (Sadeghi 2010: 273, 285). As one can see, relations between the immoral youth and the morality police has relaxed in the decades after the Iranian Revolution, in terms of ignoring the overly use of make-up as opposed to its forceful removal for example (Alavi 2006: 32).

However, there are also an unneglectable number of women who wear their veil without any ulterior motives. Not all women are political activists. For them, the hijab becomes just another way to express individuality; their drive is more dependent on peer competition than turning the system upside down. They do not want to draw anyone's attention with their lifestyle decision. This makes it clear that the 'Iranian youth' is not a homogenous classification (Sadeghi 2010: 282). An example for this heterogeneity is the case of the women who not only wear the headscarf, but also choose to wear the chador, a cloak thrown over women's outer garments. It is unclear how many young women are forced by their orthodox parents to wear this in Iran optional element of Islamic dress. However, there are known cases where this was a personal decision. Reason for that are security issues many

women complain about, like sexual molestation. They try to shield themselves from the gazes of men who are seemingly not able to control themselves. Again, it is not known, whether this has to do with particular ways of socialization in conservative families, and the aforementioned implications made about men in the Qur'an. To some extent these concerns are justified. It is the failure of the government, however, to take action against perpetrators. Instead, it focuses on the enforcement of proper veiling. This has to be understood to be a measure for security than an expression of religiosity. The freedom to choose is also here preferred over the compulsion to wear modestly. Quite the opposite, many argue that the mandate is not creating a pious community, but is driving them away from the faith they try to safeguard (Sadeghi 2010: 283-4).

The veil has become the venue for differing opinions on women's rights and how to attain them. The ultimate goal of all efforts can be described as undermining the patriarchal system within the confines of an ideological state based on Shar'ia law. The motivation is mostly not religious, but instrumental to change opinions about the access to education, employment, comprehensive health care for them *and* their family, independence from their husbands, as well as patronization and accusation of a lack of security on the violation of dress code (Alavi 2006: 194). There are no figures of how many clerics support these reforms to a more egalitarian society, but it is the statements of a few outspoken and renowned that give hope that it might be possible to change the system from within, since it only through the help of Islamic persons of authority to modernize an outdated theocratic regime. Yousef Saanei, one of the fifteen grand ayatollahs in Iran is convinced that "a woman can become the Supreme Leader, let alone the president. Islam knows no discrimination between its followers, whether on the grounds of nationality or race or gender" (Saanei in: Shirazi

2009: 207-8). The question is, how do people in Iran change their way to protest these antiquated ideals in these fast changing times of modernization and technological progress?

Protest movements used to often originate on university campuses as locations of dissent and then spread throughout the city squares. However, since Khamenei and his clerics are not only in control of the Guardian Council and the courts, but also the media outlets, anti-regime demonstrations are not always reported on in print media or TV for their fear to face the consequences (Alavi 2006: 6, 10). What do you do if traditional media fails in providing the necessary information to a disillusioned generation? The solution is to use media, like the internet, that is not in control of the religious authority for their lack of technological competence and its difficulty to be as easily regulated as print media, to bridge the gap between the "gap between the reality of Iranian society and the image cultivated by the regime" (Dan De Luce in Alavi 2006: 6). Protest movements like the One Million Signature campaign, originally started off as an online petition (Khorasani 2009: 155). One interesting and important vehicle that emerged in the last decade trying to portray Iranian society adequately is the active blogging scene. Online journals created a safe space for Iranian youths to express their opinions to national *and* international audience, open discussion about faith, politics, and also about trivialities, such as flirting or socializing, that would have been reprimanded if taken into the public sphere. Today Farsi is the fourth most frequently used language for writing blogs with over 64,000 blogs as compared to about 50 that are known in Iraq The government tries to keep up and arrest bloggers for anti-regime attitudes, but the option to blog anonymously opens up a new discussion for free speech, unconstrained by moral authorities (Alavi 2006: 1, 2, 16, 111). These blogs are an example of the 'dual lives'

many young Iranians live, separated by public and private spaces, and increasingly also in virtual spaces (Sadeghi 2010: 285-6). This begs the question, however, whether this form of organization can actually bring change and whether the voices expressing their discontent are representative of the whole youth population (Alavi 2006: 216). With the extension of the necessary infrastructure, the almost uninterrupted access to the internet through schools and universities, and the significance of social media as a communication tool during the so-called Arab Spring, one could assume that the new media will have an active role in the further shaping of Iran's future.

The development of Iranian society during the decades after the Revolution in 1979 has shown that the endeavor to create a pious Muslim society by imposing its ideals on the whole population has been difficult. The conflict between the unresponsiveness of the regime to real-life issues and focusing on religious formalities instead has driven many still self-defined pious Iranians into looking for other interpretations of Islam that isolate themselves from the precepts of the ruling party. This can especially be seen in the discontented youth that did not witness the revolution and cannot identify with its ideals anymore, demanding modern laws and the cessation of gender-based discrimination. The reappropriation of rituals like Ashura into instrumentalized celebrations of dissent and parody which focus rather on the glorification of defiant icons than its religious implications contributes to the notion of some scholars to call Iran a de facto post-Islamic society, "where […] the appeal, energy and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once ardent supporters" (Khatam 2010: 221). What can be seen is, that through islamization and regulation of public spaces, private lives do not conform to the regulations of public lives, but become even more open as a response of their

repression, as seen in premarital sex, for example. (Sadeghi 2010: 279). It can certainly be criticized that the accounts given by individuals in the blogosphere or in other qualitative studies do not provide an absolute and universal picture of the Iranian youth. However, the success of movements like the One Million Signature Campaign tell us that this active scene of internet activists is worth to be looked into more closely, for they allow us a "unique glimpse of the changing consciousness of Iran's younger generation" (Alavi 2006: 361). Paraphrasing French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, Azam Khatam asserts that, "a generation becomes a significant social force if its members share a common habitus" (Khatam 2010: 216). Like the blogger Borderline says,

> *Societies evolve and change and it's the ordinary people that change them … 70 per cent of our population is under 30 and many just don't want to live like their parents used to … Eventually they will have to … not just tolerate us … but also live by our rules.* (By Borderline in Alavi 20066: 14).

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