No sign of Spring in Tehran

A few months before the elections, the Iranian regime has blocked all information channels, and the Green opposition movement has disappeared. Iran continues to be deaf to the call for change ringing out in many Arabic countries. In the meantime, new laws are being passed to repress women and confine them to minor roles.

by Farian Sabahi

After having stifled the opposition Green Movement, which blossomed during the disputed presidential elections in 2009, the Tehran regime is now introducing a series of measures against women”, observes lawyer Shirin Ebadi, the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (in 2003). “For example, in order to get a passport, the authorities want to force unmarried Iranian women under 40 to have their applications countersigned by their fathers. This is a move to attack female activists, first and foremost”.

Why have Arabs managed to unseat dictators while the Green Wave has failed to have the same success? “Arab leaders were taken by surprise by the speed and power of the protests, while the Iranian authorities were prepared to respond to the demonstrations they themselves provoked by rigging votes”, explains Iranian professor Asef Bayat in his lecture Why Did Iran’s Green Wave Not Feel the Arab Spring (Sadighi Annual Lectures, 2012).

What’s more, while Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak did not dare to shut down the newspapers, reformist media outlets in Iran were immediately blacked out. And there was a different level of repression: “In Tunisia and Egypt the army took a step back, but in Iran the special forces trained their sites on the intellectuals, arrests 4,000 activists and killing at least 70 people”.

In contrast to Arabic governments, which depend on the West, Iran’s isolation has allowed it to violate people’s rights without paying heed to public opinion.

The defeat of the Green Wave movement can also be ascribed to its leaders, as Bayat explains: “They were non-violent, they wanted the Constitution to be changed. They tried to avoid clashes, but they couldn’t count on an organisation with a widespread base like the Muslim Brotherhood”. Furthermore, Iranians are not Arabs, they speak Persian and have not been infected by the protests broadcast on Al Jazeera; they are Shiites and for them Friday prayers is not a time for channeling dissent.

As Ebadi points out, the authorities are implementing various measures against women. Such as the ban introduced in 36 universities prohibiting women from taking some 70 science courses, the very ones most in demand by female students, who represent 65% of university-goers and are reluctant to be subjugated by the patriarchal system.

Courses women are banned from taking include Mining Engineering at the University of Tehran and Political Sciences and Economics at Isfahan. Male students are having similar difficulties signing up for History, Linguistics, Literature, Sociology and Philosophy.

The aim of the authorities – who do not claim to be behind these decisions, which were taken by the individual institutions – is to undermine the areas of management in which women have played a role since the time of the Shah, and force Iranian women back into a subordinate position at a time when unemployment is on the rise. However, these measures are paradoxical in a country where only 8% choose to study the humanities, and the majority prefer the sciences be-
cause they offer greater job opportunities, at home and abroad.

What’s more, many universities are starting to segregate the sexes: some courses cannot be held in a co-ed classroom, so lecturers run the course twice. But Iranian universities have been co-ed since Tehran University opened its doors in 1937, the only exceptions being Alzahra University (exclusively for women, the legacy of a 1964 institution) and Imam Sadeq (for men only).

Another measure against women is the end of the birth control programme. In the mid-1970s, although 37% of married women used contraceptives, in 1977 the average family size nevertheless stood at 6.6 children (8.1 in rural areas). The 1979 revolution saw Ayatollah Khomeini stop the programme introduced by the Shah, but in 1986 the Iranian population was about to pass the 50 million mark and the 3% annual rise in the population hampered growth, so the birth control programme was re-launched.

In 1993, Parliament stopped giving subsidies to large families in order to invest in education and employment for women, pensions and welfare. The goal was to drop to four children per mother by 2011: in 2000 the average had already dropped to two and in 2006 it was 1.9, for which Iran was presented with the United Nations Population Award. In 2012, 74% of married women aged 15 to 49 practiced family planning techniques, 60% used different kinds of contraception and a third opted for (male or female) sterilisation.

The economic crisis calls for caution and although the family planning budget has run dry, it is unlikely that Iranian women will start having as many children as their grandmothers did. The birth control programme appears to have been stopped for two reasons: the aging population (the current average age of 28 is predicted to rise to 40 by 2030); and fears that in the future, the Sunni minority in the Sistan and Baluchistan province in southeast Iran (where women have an average 8 - 10 children) could gain more influence and threaten the Shiite majority in the Islamic Republic.

Whatever the reasons, “both secular and Islamic women’s associations have now come together to mobilise against these anti-women measures”, says Italian lecturer and Iran expert Anna Vanzan. It is doubtful that women will give up their hard-earned, long established rights. This holds true for both the restless middle class and the more traditional ranks of society, hard-core supporters of the Islamic Republic whose women have started a process of emancipation that should not be underestimated.

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**Iran**

**Area:** 1,648,195 Km²  
**Population:** 31,129,225

**Median Age:** 27.4 years

**Religions:** Muslim (official) 98% (Shia 89%, Sunni 9%), other 2%

**Form of Government:** Theocratic republic

**Suffrage:** Universal (18 years)

**Chief of State:** Supreme Leader Ali Hoseini-KHAMENEI (since June 1989)

**Head of Government:** President Mahmud AHMADI-NEJAD (since August 2005)

**GDP:** $ 538 bn (nominal, estimates 2013)

**Inflation:** 21% (estimates 2013)

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**Political indicators**

**Political Risk & Country Analysis - UniCredit**

- **The regime continues to be divided between the conservative clerical establishment that supports the supreme leader, and the populist President Ahmadinejad. Power struggles between factions are set to increase ahead of presidential elections in June 2013.**

**Corruption:** 133 out of 176 countries

**Judicial independence:** 63 out of 176 countries

**Quality of bureaucracy:** 3 out of 144 countries

**Reference values:** first country Norway, last country Somalia

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east European crossroads
Sexual segregation in many universities is being reintroduced which means the professors have to hold the same course twice, once for the men and once for the women.

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Social indicators

- Human Development
- Press freedom
- Gender Gap
- Brain Drain

Social indicators:

- 187th Congo
- 179th Eritrea
- 135th Yemen
- 144th Algeria

Business Environment

- Ease of doing business
- Global Competitiveness
- Economic Freedom
- Net Migration
- Internet users

- Human Development
- % of seats held by women in National Parliaments

- N. of jailed population

- Wealth distribution (Gini index)
  - Very low
  - Very high

- Literacy rate
  - 85%

- Mobile phone subscriptions
  - 75% (every 100 people)

- Internet users
  - 21 (every 100 people)

- Net Migration
  - -185,650

Main obstacles:
- Dealing with construction permits,
- Getting electricity,
- Property registration.

Social cohesion affected by international isolation, sanctions, and difficult economic situation.

Out of 144 countries:
- 1st Seychelles (19)
- Last Comoros (64.3)

Out of 179 countries:
- 1st Hong Kong (175)
- Last North Korea (179)

Out of 179 countries:
- 1st Singapore (171)
- Last Central African Republic (185)

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