

Inner voices

The Supreme Leader is on Facebook

by Mohsen Firuzi

To vote or not to vote? We've been discussing this for months, at home, among friends, with taxi drivers who always claim to know more than anyone else. Elections for a new president will be held in mid-June and, as usual, people seem either disinterested or sceptical about it. Just like in 2009 and look what happened.... Yes, we were certainly better off, or at least less worse off, back then and perhaps there was more reason to believe we could change something. Now all people talk about is inflation, unemployment, the high cost of living, the sanctions that emptied the shops of all luxury goods, but even certain essential articles are hard to find now..

My uncle Ali has a heart condition and is having trouble finding his usual pills. The other day I did the rounds of various chemists to try and find them. Some of them are really disturbing because their shelves have no medicine but are filled with other, non-medical items, to avoid seeming too bare. I had no luck and ended up having to buy uncle Ali's pills off one of the shady peddlers who bring stuff back from Dubai, and of course charge the earth for it.

It now takes 25,000 Iranian rials to buy one dollar. A year ago you only needed 15,000 and two years ago it was 10,000. Some claim the market is being manipulated by the government so it can sell dollars at a higher exchange rate and use the money to cover the deficit. In the meantime, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad still hasn't presented the

budget to parliament! Who knows if a president could actually change things? But the question is, which president?

At the moment we're seeing election adverts posted by Hooshang Amirahmadi. He's been living in America for years and now wants to return here as president. He's an engineer who knows a bit of everything though my mother remembers him as a writer who published short stories during the protests against the Shah. But how does he think he can pull it off? They've even changed the electoral law recently so that a president must now have the backing of 100 political and religious personalities. They're hardly likely to choose someone who's been in California for the last 30 years!

And speaking of the new electoral law, it states that candidates can't be over 75, which rules out former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. It remains unclear whether he's in disgrace or still wields some power. Whatever the case, his daughter Faezeh has been in prison since September and now they've even put her in solitary confinement. I'm no great fan of hers, but she certainly didn't deserve to go to jail.

It doesn't take much to land you in trouble nowadays. Look what happened to that blogger, Sattar Beheshti, who was beaten to death while in custody. At least they acknowledged he'd been beaten and the police chief was removed from his post. This is little consolation for his family, but the authorities were forced to

admit the police were responsible. I've always said that if enough of us protest we'll get somewhere in the end. Look at the Arabs: yes, the Muslim Brotherhood is now leading Egypt, but at least the Egyptians managed to change the course of their history. Plus their president, Mohammed Morsi, is opposed to Syrian president Bashar al Assad and his bloody regime, something he made no bones about when visiting Iran for the Non-Aligned Movement summit in September 2012. The newspaper *Kayhan* (an influential pro-regime publication) had real trouble whitewashing Morsi's accusations levelled at "our" Syrian allies.

On the subject of bloggers, the funny thing is that the Supreme Leader (the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) has opened an account on Facebook. Yes, the very same Facebook we Iranians are officially banned from using! Of course we all use it anyway, it's just illegal. If you open the site without the filter, you see the wording "Dear user, this website is blocked, if you want more information...". Yeah right, there's no way I'm going to click for more information, they'd nail me immediately! Anyway, the Supreme Leader is on Facebook, you can see him taking walks in the mountains, leading prayer, among the crowds, always being cheered on. Of course they don't publish the insults he receives, mainly sent from Iranian emigrants in Turkey, Europe and America.

Speaking of America, there has been much debate about the film *Argo* here in Iran. I wanted to see it with my friends, in one of their homes. I usually rent a DVD to watch on my own or with my girlfriend, Mandana, but this time I wanted to see the film with other people so we could discuss it. Then I felt I had to talk to my parents about it, after all they lived through that



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time, before I was born. I asked them if there really was all that hatred and they said yes, there were people buying for blood in the streets, calling for revenge against all those who had exploited them, including the Americans. My parents said revolutions often spark these kinds of reactions but that they, like tens of thousands of other Iranians, disagreed with the hostage taking at the American embassy and everything else that was going on at the time.

There were many things I really didn't like in the film. As usual we Iranians are depicted as savages with bloodshot eyes, all of a likeness, forbidding, dark, dirty. Then there was that ridiculous ending with our guards running behind the already-airborne plane. It seems like

the Americans want to humiliate us, always humiliate us. It's not enough for them to defeat us, no, they have to humiliate us too. That's why there's still no solution to the nuclear dispute. They haven't understood that they can't make our regime lose face like this. They have to give us a way out where we can hold our heads up high, so all of us here can start to breathe again.

Sanctions are wearing us down, everything is expensive. My friend Massoud's parents have a small publishing company and they told me that publishers now only print 450 copies at a time because paper costs too much. 450 copies for a country of over 70 million people. Even *Shab-e Yalda* (a holiday of pre-Islamic origins celebrating

the winter solstice) celebrations were low-key. I spent them at home with my parents and Mandana; we bought a watermelon, pistachios, dried fruit and sweets. Everything cost even more than usual, but who cares, it was a special evening. Many people here celebrate with organised parties, new clothes and alcohol, but I prefer being with my family, hearing my Dad recite our great poets, predicting the future through the lyric poetry of Hafez (famous 14th century Persian poet) or reading passages from the Koran. Once again I was lulled by my father's voice as he reassuringly recited: *burn o heart and may your burning bring me something and your midnight worrying dismiss one hundred misfortunes.* **E**

Inner voices

Revolutionary girls

For over 15 years, in Tuscany, in a small medieval town just outside Arezzo, the Rondine association has been hosting young people from war-torn countries. Each year, the association awards a scholarship to 15 students who accept the challenge of living with the *enemy*.

In Italy, they enrol in university and take peace-building training courses under the supervision of Rondine members. By living among them, their enemies become people worth getting to know; people with whom they can communicate, and overcome prejudice, mistrust and intolerance.

At the end of their two or three years with Rondine, they return to their homelands, ready to enter the Lega delle Rondini d'Oro (League of Golden Swallows), a network of former students who continue to promote peace abroad. Maha, Radwa, Raja and Nesrine describe their experiences in a Mediterranean and European context.



Maha Sherefay: 27, born in Cairo, Egypt. A graduate in English Literature she has worked as a freelance interpreter.

“I think the greatest achievement to come out of Tahrir Square has been freedom of expression. Today, everyone can express their opinion, without fear. Everyone can talk openly about politics, which is why they get involved in it. I never used to read the newspaper. Now I talk about politics all the time: with my family, my friends, at work. There was no reason to before. We spent 30 years under Hosni Mubarak in the belief that his son Gamal would take his place. No one could have imagined an ‘exit’ like [Mubarak’s] in February 2011. Something changed that day: for the first time in my life I had the feeling that Egypt didn’t have to be Mubarak, that there could be an alternative, that politics were essential. Politics reunited our people around a common goal: the good of Egypt. Today, we all express our opinions, our political thoughts. We discuss ideas and together try to find the best way to achieve this common good. We have a long road ahead of us, but the biggest gift of the January Revolution was hope, you can feel it in the air”.

Maha, Egypt



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Radwa Arnous, 29, born in Cairo, Egypt. A graduate in Business Administration, she has worked as a marketing and communications officer at the British Council in Cairo.

“It seems strange to me to see demonstrations, sit-ins, protests – every day. It never happened before. Every day someone is fighting for their ideas. This is definitely one of the great endowments of our revolution. January 25 made us interested in ourselves, in our dreams, in the dreams of others. There weren’t only poor people in Tahrir Square, those whose first demand is some ‘bread’. The rich were there too, side by side with the poor. There was compassion in Tahrir Square, the desire to listen to other people’s problems, to share in them, to make them your own. This compassion has lasted beyond the revolution and has made Egyptians increasingly interested in one another. I’m the first to show interest. I didn’t use Twitter, I discovered it during the revolution and today it’s the first site I check when I wake up. I seek out other people’s opinions, even when they’re different from my own. I respond to what they write, and read the comments they send me. I’ve come to understand that this is a way to get to know things, to learn, to grow. And to carry on that shared feeling that was born in Tahrir Square”.

Radwa, Egypt



Raja Ftiti, 25, born in Tunis, Tunisia. A Rural Engineering graduate, she has been involved in teaching university training courses.

“The revolution gave me a sense of freedom. It gave me hope that I’d be able to show myself as I am, without the fear I used to feel every time I left the house. People in the street would stare at me and I was afraid I’d get arrested because of my *foulard*. Today I can look police officers in the eye when I meet them in the street. I feel stronger: I know I have the right to practice my religion as I see fit. Before there was always talk of women’s rights, but never of the women’s right to practice their religion as they wanted to. For the first time, with the revolution, people were talking about this as well. Before we couldn’t pray in the early morning because the police would check to see if your lights were on. Now, I’m finally free to ‘communicate with Allah’ at any time of the day. For the first time ever, I have the hope of being able to find a job because of my skills, and not because of my looks”.

Raja, Tunisia



Nesrine Ben Slimen, 26, born in Tunis, Tunisia. Currently studying for an International Relations master, she has worked as an organiser for the Afkar Mostakela Community, an association that provides support for Tunisian politicians.

“The day Ben Ali left was the first time I felt proud to be Tunisian. Beforehand, the thought of choosing my own and my country’s destiny seemed like an impossible pipe dream. Whenever I passed by the Ministry of the Interior, I’d quicken my step – it was a ‘place of torture’. Now, I can stroll by it without fear. Before, when I talked about politics with my friends at a café, I was always worried about who might be sitting at the next table; who was listening; who could report us to the police. Now on the other hand, I can relax and enjoy myself, I’m no longer afraid to talk about politics, in fact I want it to be an essential part of my life. My university friends and I have founded the IRA (International Relations Association), an association of young people who want to change Tunisia’s destiny. We could never have done that before. Today, being Tunisian means working together for the future of this country”.

Nesrine, Tunisia