

A Fledgling Movement: Women and the Iranian election

Written by Haideh Moghissi

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HAIDEH MOGHISSI, JUN 27 2009

Iranian voters have cast their ballots. Few people in Iran and even fewer outside believed that the election of a new president would bring meaningful changes to the Islamic regime's policies. The country's cleverly designed and forcefully safeguarded political system makes effective challenges from outside virtually impossible. The rule by intimidation and terror, the cancerous corruption of the ruling clerics and their clans, the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the horrifying signs of the profound despair of youth as reflected in growing drug addiction and prostitution, have dashed hopes for the possibility of the Islamic regime reforming itself.

Why then has the presidential election renewed much excitement, generating debate and rejuvenating activism? While election campaigns always involve the exposure of previous misconduct, incompetency, and outright corruption within the regime, the public is of course not privy to these debates due to the absence of a free press and lack of government transparency. However, elections relieve the tension of day-to-day life in Iran by temporarily putting coercive apparatuses on (shorter) leashes. Also, the relative opening of the political space during elections energizes the opposition to show discontent and push for reforms.

The remarkable mobilization of women and youth in the 1997 election of Mohamad Khatami was widely understood as a vote against the more conservative candidate, with a hope to halt Islamists' further advances against women's social and political rights. Eight years of Khatami's inaction and conformist presidency, followed by four years of Ahmadinejad's military-security-based administration, have more clearly shown the futility of hopes placed on any candidate from within the Islamic political and cultural system. This reality drove many Khatami enthusiasts into despair and admissions of defeat. Not the Iranian feminist activists though. In fact, this round of Iran's pre-election politics was marked by the full-force entry of the Iranian women's movement onto the political scene with a well-thought-out strategy that has mobilized many change-seeking individuals and groups within civil society.

Without supporting any presidential candidate, Iranian women, under the banner of "women's coalition movement" (jonbesh-e Hamgerai'i), have proclaimed two major demands: 1) Joining the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); 2) A constitutional amendment to eliminate discriminatory articles that deprive women of equal rights with men. This ingenious strategy has drawn support from over 35 women's and social justice groups and 600 activists and intellectuals, some of whom may not have actually cast their votes in favour of any candidate. The campaign forced all four candidates to spell out their views on the plight of women in Iran and what they would do to improve it. For instance, two candidates, Karrubi and Rezaee, committed themselves to including a woman in their cabinet. Others articulated their opposition to restrictions on women's legal rights and public participation.

Obviously, election promises are not to be taken too seriously, as the electorate in Iran, as elsewhere, knows only too well. While the intent of women's entry into Iranian electoral politics is more modest, it has longer-term objectives. They do not ignore or deny the legitimizing impact of women's participation in the elections, particularly at a time when the Islamic regime is increasingly losing its legitimacy. With much confidence and political maturity, they have expanded their consciousness-raising activities, reaching out to the broadest sections of the population, distributing thousands of pamphlets outlining why they have entered into electoral politics and their immediate and long-term goals. They want to seize the relatively free political space – during the election period – in order to publicize women's demands, to strengthen contact with the general population, to rebuild relations, and create solidarity

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between women's groups and other social justice and human rights activists. In other words, they have entered into election politics with a clear vision of what is possible to achieve and what is not, and are determined not to let go of what is possible because of what is not.

Starting with their defiance against wearing the head scarf ordered by Khomeini only three weeks after the 1979 Revolution, Iranian women have remained at the forefront of the struggle for democracy and justice, exposing and pushing back the Islamists' offensive inch by inch. But at no time has the political influence of women and women's issues been so profoundly visible as at present.

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