
From the street to the internet: feminine and feminist contestation in Teheran. Moving gender in the post-electoral demonstrations in Iran in 2009.

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The day after Ahmadinejad fraudulently claimed he had been elected, on June 13th 2009, people took to the streets to demonstrate against his claim of having received over 60% of the vote. Foreign media reported the massive presence of women among demonstrators¹, and the urban middle class was said to be the most active and visible in the demonstrations. The young and women were the most vocal in protesting this illegitimate grasp of power by radically conservative groups. Iranian women seized a number of spaces in order to fight the continuation of Ahmadinejad's presidency and to protest the arrests of opponents to his regime (reformists, feminists and student leaders) and abuses of power. Women took to the streets and platforms, they wrote blogs, calling for their claims to be heard, asking for social justice, democratic institutions, and improvements of the situation of women.

Women's access to public space: a legacy, a paradox, and a number of claims

Since the Islamic Republic was instituted, a strict code has regulated the presence of women and men in public space: women have to wear a veil, public transportation separates men and women, there are separate schools for girls and boys, women are banned from public dance representations, men and women attend separately, etc. The Islamic Republic did not introduce veiling or the separation of men and women in public, but these were enforced after the 1979 Revolution. They became a paradoxical symbol of the modernity of the Islamic regime (Paidar, 1995). During the revolution, the *chador* and the veil were symbols of resistance to the Pahlavi regime and contributed to unify women across socio-economic divides, against the monarchy and Western influences (Kian, 2002). The *chador* and sex segregation, as imposed by the Islamic regime, allowed many women to enter public space, to attend university and to take jobs (Rostami Povey, 2001). They facilitated women's access to the public sphere and emphasized their role in nation-building. A whole new political dimension was given to an existing practice.

The wearing of the *hejab* and the sexual segregation of public space were imposed in several phases. Civil servants and employees of the public sector were the first who had to cover their hair from 1980, before the regulation was generalized, by the end of 1981, to all Iranian women (Paidar, 1995). Public space and social activities, sports, arts, professions were then gender-segregated. Bodies, and in particular female ones, were subjected to pressure, and it became an area for the regime to assert its independence. From gyms to films, from school benches to buses, public space is divided according to gender.

This segregation has changed over time, with regulations and forms of repression fluctuating since the Islamic Republic was established. It is not a monolithic regime, but has followed the social, demographic and political transformations which have taken place in the country. Concessions were gained in particular in terms of professional activities, since women represent no less than 60% of students in higher education. Sports have become ever more popular amongst women. From yoga to mountain-climbing, women have conquered a number of spaces which challenge the patriarchal order (Direnberger, 2010). Mixed spaces have also arisen in the capital. In the subway system and in

¹ « Iran : les femmes en première ligne de la contestation », *Le Monde*, 26/06/2009 ; « A Women's Rebellion », *The Guardian*, 23/06/2009 ; « Role of Women in Iran Protest » *Washington Post*, 28/06/2009, « Iranian women fight on the frontlines of protest », *Associated Press*, 24/06/2009 ; « Women at forefront of Iranian Protests », *Radio Free Europe*, 22/06/2009.

buses women unaccompanied by a man are still separated from men. In collective taxis and on motorcycles such rules do not apply. In the north of Teheran, in Darband *chaikhâne*, there are places where young men and young women can meet outside the private sphere to drink tea and smoke *qaliân*. Fast-food outlets such as *Boof* or the numerous cafés and restaurants such as *Khaneye Honarmandan* (The House of Artists) in central Teheran, on Taleghani street and *Chahar miz* (Four Tables), close to Amir Kabir University, are also meeting places for young men and women. Hourcade (2004 : 523) comments about these places in which, along with shopping centres and public gardens, mixed attendance became tolerated in the 1990s : "The Islamic government, and some municipalities, that of Teheran in particular, acknowledged that it was impossible to build a society on total sexual segregation, and therefore developed well-defined and controllable spaces for women and men to meet, from the 1990s onwards". (Hourcade, 2004 : 523).

Iranian women are also mobile in public, and move autonomously over short or long distances. Driver's licences for women were never questioned, and women form a large share of car-drivers in Teheran. Women of different economic and social backgrounds move around to meet friends or family, to go to school or college, to shop or go sight-seeing, to go to places of worship, or to work. Surveys show women making four million trips a day in Teheran. Mina Saidi (2004 : 452) who has closely examined women's mobility and has shown that these trips could be both local and wider range. She concludes that "women's spatial mobility is a major factor of change, which provides them with new forms of sociability, outside their family, new relations with men, access to information, to training, to work and to citizenship" (Saidi, 2004 : 452).

Despite their presence in the public sphere and the social change that this has brought about, Iranian women still suffer major discriminations in judicial, cultural, economic and political areas. These are not suffered gladly by a youthful society and rebellious youth. While women held 70% of master's degrees in law in 2007, the Constitution did not allow them to become judges.

Many are legal advisors and in practice they do all the legal work of a judge, however, in family law, they cannot sign legal sentences. Iran being a paradoxical place (Ladier-Fouladi 2009), a woman's testimony during trial is worth only half a man's, in a country where 30% of doctorates in law are awarded to women.² Quotas for men are more and more frequent, in particular in medicine and engineering, in order to limit women's access to some fields. This reflects the enthusiasm of women for further education despite discrimination and the difficulties they encounter in finding employment. Women elected to Parliament from the first to the fifth legislature have managed to have some professional law slightly reformed: the husband can no longer prevent his wife from working, maternity leave was granted, in addition to early retirement. Iranian women in the workplace, however, are usually passed over for promotion or pay raises, under religious, essentialist pretexts. While on average better qualified, they accept lower salaries and are at higher risk of losing their jobs than men. Their quest for economic independence and professional achievement, and a degree of emancipation, is minimally supported by changes in the law (Kian-Thiébaud 2002). So the massive presence of women in demonstrations appears to be a result of the gap between governmental policy and society's calls for change, ever stronger since the revolution. Since he took power, however, Ahmadinejad has confronted women's organizations and backed a proposal to dismantle measures meant to discourage polygamy. He suspended the publication of women's journals such as *Zanân* in 2008 and *Irândokht* in June 2009. He was the only candidate who had made no commitment to the improvement of women's condition in his electoral platform, which is why so many women were incensed by his so-called victory.

Iranian women were conspicuous in the public demonstrations, since they have to a large extent appropriated public space in the last three decades. They are present in economic, academic, cultural, artistic and political spheres, though less so in institutionalized political space since laws dictating gender inequality still operate. The demonstrations in 2009 and 2010 are in part a consequence of the gap between the effective citizenship of Iranian women and their access to

² Lecture by Amir Nikpey, "Women in the judiciary in Iran", 21/01/2010, Paris.

public space, on the one hand, and the complete closure of institutions when it comes to women's rights and their political representation, on the other.

Making space for contestation in the city: the street and the parks.

Women's movements claimed the street as a space to make themselves heard virtually from their inception. As early as 1906, in the journal *Ghanun* [Law], Mirza Malkom Khan described political turmoil and the large part played by women, which surprised contemporaries (Paidar, 1995). Thousands of women took to the streets and contributed to overturning the monarchy, in league with the clergy or merely to claim recognition of their citizenship. The movement was therefore diverse, but precocious enough to contribute the nation-building, and to the independence of the state from British influence. This first generation of Iranian feminism was mobilized against the corruption and oppression of the monarchy in the 1906 uprising (Paidar, 1995).

A second and equally diverse feminist wave formed in 1979 to overthrow the monarchy: there were both women loyal to the principles of the Revolution, and in positions of power, and secular women fighting for their rights. Tens of thousands of them took to the streets. While they played traditional feminine roles behind the lines, by taking care of the wounded and providing supplies to fighters, they also represented up to one third of demonstrators, and many of them were killed by the repression (Paidar, 1995). This significant contribution gave increased legitimacy to their stake in the Islamic Republic and their claim on the public sphere.

Current feminist movements developed under Khatami's reformist rule, and can be quite critical of their past mistakes. They do not gloss over their failure to deal with the radicalization of the regime and their disagreements with it. It is in a reflexive and disillusioned frame of mind that Iranian women's movements get together and meet on the streets, fully aware of their failures but also of their strengths. These women call for more openness in politics and culture, more democratic institutions and laws, and an acknowledgement of minorities and the poor. Their discourse is generally well received by the younger generation and people who have been disappointed by the regime. During Spring 2005, an unprecedented coalition of feminists protested constitutional gender inequality in a 6000-strong demonstration. Four years later, feminist activists took part in the uprising and were again active in organizing demonstrations.

Iranian women's political activism therefore has a time-honoured tradition. This was the legacy claimed in 2009 and 2010, in the face of increased repression on the part of Ahmadinejad's regime. Iranian women once again took to the streets in Teheran and in other major cities to challenge the president's fictitious claim that he had been reelected, and the conservative and authoritarian policies his government promoted.

Iranian women also make use of the space of parks, in particular the Laleh Park, which play a specific part in daily life in Teheran: they are places where it is possible to negotiate, or subvert, what the regime forbids. Aware that it cannot control public space completely and gender-segregate the entire city, the Islamic government let these places become places of interaction for men and women during the 1990s: "these mixed spaces allow for a degree of tolerance, with clear limits" (Hourcade, 2004 : 523). Though freer than others, allowing for the practice of sports by both men and women (jogging, badminton, volley-ball, ping-pong for instance), and for the presence of young couples, of mixed-gender groups of friends, these places are also under scrutiny by a brigade with limited tolerance. There are also clear temporal variations. During the month of *moharam* (a month devoted to mourning imam Hossein), tolerance of "deviant" behaviour is considerably restricted, while it is much less so during *sizdah bedar*³ (literally, the "thirteenth outside"). During *sizdah bedar*, Laleh park sees hundreds of families claiming a place to picnic, small tents are set up

³ This traditional celebration takes place thirteen days after Norouz, the Iranian New Year. "The 13th day has always been festive, celebrated out of doors and spent picnicking with the family, often with music and dancing" (Saidi-Sharouz, 2008 : 74).

and *kebabs* are barbecued. These picnics give a sense of freedom. "Picnickers are easy and relaxed, free of the negative tensions accumulated all week or all year" (Saidi-Sharouz, 2008 : 81). Young people and adults, both men and women, play badminton, and the women of the brigade let them do so. Some even play cards, despite the official proscription. It is as though the rules of the private sphere, which allow for mixed publics and the bending of rules, takes over in the park, a public space. This "in-betweenness" makes parks special places, with a degree of independence from the codes which prevail in the rest of the city.

During Spring 2009, as a celebration of the 30 years of the Islamic Republic, the municipality of Teheran organized a large workshop for arts students both male and female. The aim was to paint a large canvas, two metres high, that was hung from the park's railings. The contrasts between the painting and painted women could not have been more striking: young women often wearing a mere colourful *roosari* (scarf) or a *maqnaeh*⁴, were alongside young men, painting women wearing the *chador*. While they chose to paint some of the traditional female figures, mourning a child or husband who gave his life for the Republic, they also painted women parading in the street during the revolution. The workshop took place on a street adjacent to the park and the inhabitants of the city, both men and women, stopped by to chat and discuss to painting. The canvas was to be painted in two days, and displayed for several weeks, but in the end it was only on view for one day. This probably illustrates the limits to the freedom enjoyed in parks.

Parks do however retain their "in-betweenness", between public and private, between control and subversion. During demonstrations, they become places of contestation. After opponents of the regime started disappearing or were killed on the streets or in prison, the victims' mothers spoke up and created a movement called "Mourning Mothers of Iran", or "The Mothers of Laleh", because they met in the park, to the south of the city, every Saturday evening. On June 27th, 2009, they made a public statement which crossed the Iranian borders thanks to the internet: "We shall never let this crime against us and our children fall into oblivion. From now on and until all the demonstrators have been freed from prison, until violence has stopped and the people who killed our children are punished, we shall meet every week-end for a silent wake in the Laleh Park, near the place where our beloved martyr Neda died". During these peaceful meeting, some of the women were beaten and arrested. They were subsequently released but some are still awaiting trial⁵. Thirty of seventy women present were arrested for protesting the death of their child in the event that followed the election.

Institutional political space: a dead-end.

During the demonstrations, many women directly called into question official political institutions. Fatemeh Karoubi, the wife of Mehdi Karoubi, a reformist candidate in the 2009 presidential election, wrote an open letter to the Supreme Leader, complaining of aggression against her son Ali Karoubi on February 11th, 2010 [22 bahman 1388, the thirty-first anniversary of the Revolution] by armed forces: "They not only showed physical and verbal brutality, they threatened a 27-year old man in the house of God". She also complained of the absence of an "independent judiciary system to record citizen's complaints, or a Parliament that would actively protect people's rights"⁶. This is by no means Fatemeh Karoubi's first intervention in politics, as she was a member of the Islamic Association of Women and took part in her husband's campaign. Her open letter was made public on reformist websites *Kalame* [Words], *Rahesabz* [The Green Path] and *Sahamnews*. Pictures online show wounds on Ali Karoubi's arms and back. Fatemeh Karoubi openly criticized the regime but

⁴ The *maqnaeh* is a black veil which covers the shoulders and is worn at universities and in administrative environments. It covers less than the *chador* and can be worn in a way that leaves hair visible.

⁵ Haleh Esfandiari, « Iran's Women of War »,

<http://blogs.nybooks.com/post/334646643/irans-women-of-war/>

⁶ « Nâmeye sargoshâdeh Fatemeh Karubi be Aghaye Khâmaney » [An open letter from Fatemeh Karubi to Mr Khamenei], <http://www.rahesabz.net/>

astutely used what is seen as a mother's calling, to defend her son: by talking as a mother she could openly challenge the regime's failure. She used a status officially valued by the Islamic Republic⁷ to call for a fairer regime, not left in the hands of "irresponsible people". She states in her letter her aim is first to convince the Supreme Guide to intervene in favour of young people who are being detained, "before it is too late for those young unknown" arrested after the election.

Spouses of political challengers have also taken part in political struggles. Many wives of political prisoners have also spoken up to challenge the arrest and the conditions of detention of their husbands. They are often the only people entitled to visit them in prison and to make their situation there known publicly. In an interview to the online journal *Rooz*, Fatemeh Adinevand, the wife of Abdollah Momeni, arrested while campaigning on behalf of Mehdi Karoubi, says her husband was being tortured in detention⁸. In an interview to the same journal, the wife of the journalist Ahmad Zeidabadi, also testified to the physical and psychological violence her husband had been subjected to⁹, as did Fakhrossadat Mohtashamipour, the wife of Mostafa Tajzadeh, a former minister of the Khatami government¹⁰. Fatemeh Karoubi spoke to *Le Monde* (January 7th, 2010) of her fears for her own life and her husbands: "I say categorically: if something bad happens to M. Karoubi, the government will be responsible". These women are not merely relaying information, they are taking very significant risks in a repressive political context. They talk not only to Iranian papers published in Persian, but also to Anglophone, or Western newspapers. Their aim is not only to testify to pressure or bad treatments endured by their husbands, but also to take a clear position of opposition to the regime. Fakhrossadat Mohtashamipour went through a lot in order to gain the right to visit her husband and told *Roozonline*: "I think this delay in visitation is because the gentlemen hope to extract some confessions out of him, so that they can repeat their silly sham trials in his presence too. Both the state-owned media and people who have previous enmity toward him want him to confess against himself, because of Tajzadeh's very harsh criticisms against them". This statement constitutes an indictment of the judiciary institutions, and in particular of the revolutionary tribunals that try political dissidents. To gain the right to visit her husband, she used legal recourses and calls on the highest authorities: "It is a dark stain on Mr. Hashemi Shahroudi's record that he has not even agreed to meet with us. We have asked to meet with him several times. We requested a time to visit Mr. Larijani, and he agreed to a meeting next week. We are hopeful that we are able to achieve our demands with the help of people's representatives".

Parvin Fahimi was spokeswoman for the association of Mothers of Laleh. Her son Sohrab Arabi disappeared during the June 15th demonstration in which approximately three million people took part. He was identified on photo n°12 in the Shapour street police quarters, in Teheran. His death was made public 26 days after he disappeared. His mother spoke publicly to the municipal council on the 23rd of July: "I ask the City Council, what did my son ask of you? What did he ever ask of the government? What did he ask of his country? ... We wanted nothing but peace, tranquility and a freedom of thought – that's what's important to us, is that my son thought about whom he voted for and where his vote goes (...) As a mother, I ask God day and night to put an end to this injustice". Claims went unheard and the repression of demonstrators was extremely harsh. Official statistics speak of three thousand arrests and sixty people killed. Many women were beaten, wounded, killed,

⁷ The Islamic Constitution of 1979 grants mothers a pivotal role: "By returning to her principal and precious mission as mother and educator of human beings, she is on the frontline and accompanies men's struggle in life's different domains" (Potocki, 2004 : 36). During the war between Iran and Iraq, mothers were called on to give up their children as martyrs. They were explicitly solicited by the state to take part in the war effort and ensured their family's social and financial recognition by letting their sons go to war.

⁸ <http://www.roozonline.com/english/news/newsitem/article/2009/august/07//he-has-lost-power-to-move-and-speak.html>

⁹ <http://www.roozonline.com/english/news/newsitem/article/2009/august/21//zeidabadi-seemed-insane-because-of-pressure.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.roozonline.com/english/news/newsitem/article/2009/august/13//seriously-worried-about-detained-relatives.html>

or detained as political prisoners, particularly after June 12th, 2009 (Tohidi, 2009). In the months following the poll, many feminist activists were jailed including the lawyer Shadi Sadr; Mansoureh Shojaee, a founder of the campaign "One million signatures"; Mahin Fahimi, a member of Women For Peace; Parisa Kakayi, a member of the Journalists' Committee for Human Rights (*komiteh gozâreshgarân hoquqe bashar*) and; Zoya Hasani. Nineteen activists in women movements, or journalists, were arrested during *ashura*, in January. Forms of arrest and detention seem irregular and often border on psychological or physical torture. After her release, Shadi Sadr used the feminist website *Meydaan (Place)* to speak of, the conditions in prison and of the psychological pressure exerted on activists¹¹.

Some influential religious reformists such as Montazeri, Sanei and Khalaji support democratic change and gender equality, in sharp contrast with Ahmadinejad's policies. The President of Iran was maybe attempting to demonstrate his interest in women's political emancipation when he nominated the first female minister ever in the Islamic Republic. No one was fooled, however, about his conservative commitment, when he nominated three women from Parliament for ministerial jobs: all three are known for their conservative and anti-feminist credentials, as were most women parliamentarians elected in 2004. "Shortly after their election, two of them, the most stridently anti-feminist [Fatemeh Alia and Eshrat Shaye] supported polygamy, called for more strongly repressive measures against "badly veiled" women and spoke against the adoption of the CEDAW" (Kian, 2010 : 62). Among the three nominees, only Marziyyeh Vahid Dastjirdi obtained a vote of confidence. A member of the Society of Combat Clergy of Teheran, hailing from the traditionalist right, this professor of medicine is no friend of the feminist cause, and is committed to the conservative, Islamic line on women. In Parliament, she opposed reforms attempting to institute equal divorce rights for men and women. Her nomination is symptomatic of a quest for legitimacy on the part of the current government, which tolerates no real openness. Fatemeh Govaree, after her arrest in July 2009, wrote in the feminist blog *Madrasse feminist*, "the main objection of women activists is the fact that this government's illegitimacy with all of its components cannot provide legitimacy by placing a few woman ministers, this is an insult to all of our intelligence. Having women ministers does not mean or guarantee a better position for women in our society"¹². The nomination of Marziyyeh Vahid Dastjirdi is evidence of the gap which separates feminine representation in the government from feminist claims arising from civil society and political movements repressed by the regime.

Virtual spaces and new citizenship

Confronted with a legal system that has hardly changed in three decades and still rules by the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, Iranian society has nonetheless tended to secularize and place more emphasis on the individual. Political identities have changed accordingly. Thirty-one years after the revolution, most Iranians have no personal memory of the monarchic dictatorship, which means one of the unifying elements of post-revolutionary society is rapidly losing currency. New relations with the political are emerging, in a country where "post-Islamist society and Islamist state have parted ways, during the war and further still after Khomeyni's death" (Khosrokhavar, 2001 : 296). Disenchantment and disappointment in political Islam as embodied by the current government are the fuel of contestation. A new form of Iranian citizenship is being born in this mobilization. As Fhrad Khosrokhavar wrote "the profound crisis the Islamist state is undergoing is significant of the outrage of a society that wants to free itself from autocracy. It speaks of the strength of the new

¹¹ <http://www.meydaan.com/Showarticle.aspx?arid=883>

¹² Fatemeh Govaree, <http://femschool.ws/spip.php?article3115>

Iranian society, which refuses to let itself be subjugated by a state that denies its most sacred right, that to vote. This crisis expresses a new citizen identity".¹³

One major feature of this new identity is the part played by the internet in its construction. The possibilities offered by blogs, video-sharing and social networks such as *Youtube*, *Twitter*, *Facebook* are considerable for a young and literate population that can afford computers and internet access and needs to escape the control on public space by political institutions. Internet is a relatively recent part of the construction of social and political relations in Iran. It allows the individual to sidestep the institutional order and to encounter the Other either in the country or abroad. It has given a voice to agents that have no access to official political space: the young, women, but also politicians who have been banned (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2005). Within the Green Movement, the internet played a major part in broadcasting information and organizing demonstrations. Facebook was used in Moussavi's presidential campaign, in a bid to attract younger voters. The site was censored one week before the elections for several days in order to favour the place of the more traditional media in the debate, and to make official declarations easier to control. In the wake of the election, the opposition movement organized via internet. Reformist sites such as *Rahesabz*, *Sahamnews* and *Jaras* carried the opposition's declarations, information about arrested activists, the dates and times of future demonstrations, as well as slogans and images.

The Laleh Mothers' Movement created a website, called Mournfulmothers, to tell of their murdered children, plead for justice and to instigate protest. The site is supported by Iranian feminist movements and has links to sites such as *Madresse feminist (Feminist School)*, *Maydaan (Place)* or *Zan-e Iran (Woman of Iran)*. These are not merely virtual links, and women's movements in Iran cut across many social strata. The internet has been an essential outlet for women's movements, in particular since the journals *Zan*, in 1999, *Zanân*¹⁴ in 2008 and *Irاندokht* in 2009 were censored. They were a political forum for debate between Islamic and secular feminists, and the fact that they were banned shows they were seen as a threat by the regime: alternative information and alternative power. Islamic feminists had joined mainstream politics after the revolution and tried to influence institutions in a direction favourable to women, but some of them were disappointed by the apparent lack of change and joined secular feminists to fight gender inequality (Kian ; 2010). Websites allowed for a continuation of their discussions despite also suffering censorship. *Maydaan* kept track of the demonstrations and recorded all of the arrests of feminists or human rights activists. People close to those who had been arrested were able to express themselves there and described what others had suffered at the hands of the regime. There, as in *Madresse feminist*, feminists call for the release of political prisoners.

The opposition's initiatives after the arrest of the spokesman for the students' movement, Majid Tavakoli, are symptomatic of the role played by internet in challenging gender relations. Iranian youth is in quest of political and cultural perspectives. "A new juvenile generation is refusing the regime's puritanism and its attempt to rule individuals' lives in their totality, in the name of Islam. What we have here is an urban, educated and modernized youth, claiming its autonomy against any transcending norm" (Khosrokhavar, 2001 : 201). This change in the relations between youth and political power was first visible in the 1999 student demonstrations, and again in 2009. Twenty three year old Majid Tavakoli, who had already been arrested, gave a moving speech in the Amir Kabir Polytechnic University, which had become the centre of student struggle. The next day, the state-controlled media announced he had been arrested and broadcast pictures of Tavakoli wearing a blue veil under a black *chador*. The aim was to put pressure on the students' movement. A Facebook network was rapidly created to protest this arrest and the humiliation of women. The regime was trying to disparage the student movement by showing one of its leaders wearing the *chador*, which

¹³ Khosrokhavar, in *Le Monde*, June 28th, 2009 « La crise en Iran révèle la tumultueuse naissance d'une société libre ».

¹⁴ *Zanân* is an innovative experience in Iranian media and politics. Its manager, Shahla Sherkat, publishes articles which challenge the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an, and oppose gender inequalities in the spheres of the family, the workplace or politics.

makes sense from the perspective of a government that forbids any behaviour outside strict heteronormativity. The clergy approves of sex-change operations where surgery can annihilate gender ambiguity. A man wearing the *chador* is humiliated in the exact measure that a woman wearing it is set as exemplary by the regime. For many Iranian women it represented an opportunity to enter the public sphere. There is a double message: the conservative government both reasserts heteronormativity and gender inequality, since it humiliates a man by using a female attribute which allowed for academic, professional and social emancipation of many women. The young photographer Arash Ashourinia started an initiative on Facebook that gained support throughout the world. He started a campaign entitled "We are all Majid" [« Mâ hameghi Majid hastim »]. Approximately 450 men from civil society added their picture, with a veil, to the Facebook page: in this instance, the use of the veil by men works as resistance to an ultra-conservative regime.

Internet also played a part in the 2009 and 2010 demonstrations by allowing pictures and icons to become famous throughout the world. The death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young inhabitant of Teheran killed on the street on 20 June 2009, was filmed and the video made available on YouTube. She became a worldwide symbol of protest and repression in Iran: « Neda Agha-Soltan, 26 years old, became, with internet speed, an icon of the contestation of the Iranian regime¹⁵, "she has become more than an icon for the protest movement"¹⁶. She was described as a victim and as a martyr, having defied the Iranian regime. But she has become known more for her "angel face" exposed on internet and in newspapers than for her political engagement: "she was an unwitting Gavroche in the Iranian revolt"¹⁷, "'she wasn't into politics" remembers Golshad"¹⁸, "Tuesday, in an interview to the BBC, her fiancé accused militias close to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of having shot her, and added she was not taking part in the demonstrations"¹⁹.

The woman who was to become the symbol of resistance to Iranian authoritarianism was in the street by mere chance, a passive bystander: "She was in an area near the main protests with her music teacher, in a car mired in traffic"²⁰. Regardless of her degree of involvement, and of whether her presence at the demonstrations was accidental, this "icon" which became famous throughout the world is depicted as apolitical. Thus the internet, newspapers and TV favoured a passive image of Iranian women, as victims of arbitrary violence from the regime, rather than a dynamic, involved image of women active in the protest. This is the paradox in the way the media handled the demonstrations: journalists both reported themselves surprised at the massive presence of women in the streets, and focused on a passive image of a woman suffering the abuses of the regime.

The demonstrations which followed the 2009 election showed the huge gap between a radicalised regime and a changed society. The massive repression against Ahmadinejad's opponents also testifies to the legitimacy crisis of the current government. The relations between society and government are complex, and paradoxical. The debate around women's rights, and feminist demands, have never been more conspicuous than they were in this campaign. The demonstrations were massively supported and attended by women, who have gained new spaces for protest, in the face of government radicalism. This struggle is the continuation of a long Iranian tradition of fights against social injustice and for democratization. By diversifying spaces of critique, from the street to the international arena, Iranian women are forcing open the political game and proving a different social model is possible.

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¹⁵ *Le Figaro*, 24/06/2009 "Le destin de Neda, "martyre" en Iran".

¹⁶ *CBS News*, 23/06/2009, "More than an icon".

¹⁷ *Le Monde*, 2009/06/23 "Neda, une histoire qui synthétise la complexité du conflit".

¹⁸ *Le Figaro*, 24/06/2009, "Le Destin de Neda, "martyre" en Iran".

¹⁹ *Le Monde*, 2009/06/23 "Neda, une histoire qui synthétise la complexité du conflit".

²⁰ *CBS News*, 23 juin 2009, "More than an icon".

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