

The Women's Movement: An Emerging Power

Four years of marginalisation, discrimination, continuous threats and sporadic incarceration under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government have made Iranian women more sensitive about the presidential elections. Women's rights activists who supported a boycott of the 2005 presidential elections are now united in demanding the inclusion of women's issues in the programmes of the candidates running for the presidency.



During his 2005 presidential campaign Ahmadinejad assured women that their "Hejab" [the Islamic clothing that covers the body from head to toe] is not an issue, especially in light of economic and social problems facing the Islamic Republic. However, as president he established the "Islamic guidance police force" which during his administration has arrested and prosecuted thousands of women across the country for not wearing proper Islamic clothing.

In addition to a stricter interpretation of Islamic dress for women, the Ahmadinejad administration has acted in several other ways which has provoked female activism in this election. The Presidential Office for Women became the Presidential Office for Women and Family, changing the name and goals of the only governmental institution devoted to female issues. The addition of the word 'family' indicated the direction in which his administration hoped to take women's issues. His vice-president who runs this office and subscribes to a more traditional interpretation of women's role in society, removed from the office all previous research, publications, and brochures on female issues that had been published over the past decade. New governmental programmes and publications stressed traditional interpretations of female issues, emphasising the role of women as mothers and downplaying female participation in the workplace and even in politics.

This office focused on the negative influence on the rearing of children of a mother working outside the home, the advantages of the as homemaker and the link between female morality and wearing of proper Islamic clothing. It increased propagation of the cultural importance of traditional Islamic teachings, and established programmes in 290 provincial districts that have trained some 270,000 so far in the culture of the 'proper family'.

Second, the Ahmadinejad government has worked to limit the number of females entering higher education. This went against the 1989 law designed to entitle women with the right to study in all university courses. In 1989 women made up 42% of those sitting for university entrance exams. In 2006 this had reached 65%. As a response, the Ahmadinejad government rationed the number of seats for females in 26 university courses in 2006. This increased to 39 courses in 2007. In 2008, the Majles [Parliament] Research Centre, which was in the hands of Ahmadinejad supporters, published a report that expressed "concern" over the increased number of women in higher education. It called this increase "a waste of the country's resources for educating professionals" and a way "to severely



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damage the family institution” which would result in an unstable society.

Third, the government of Ahmadinejad sent a bill, named “In Defence of the Family” to the Majles (Parliament). This unprecedented bill aimed to allow men to take a second wife without the approval of the first wife. Women activists across the political spectrum, from the conservative and traditional to the liberal and modern, mobilised in opposition to the bill. For the first time in many years, in an act of great symbolism, the coordinated women’s rights activists went to the Majles to meet with MPs and to convince them to withdraw the bill from the Majles agenda. The result was that even the conservative Majles could not muster enough votes to pass this bill.

As a result of their success in unifying and then defeating this bill, women activists have become fully aware that women’s basic rights is a good starting point for unified action against discrimination. The presidential elections is providing platform for the airing of female issues as candidates attempt to garner the large female vote.

THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution some 30 years ago, two main approaches have characterised the female movement. One is made up of revolutionary Muslim women activists who profoundly believe in the Iranian Islamic revolution and religious doctrines. The second approach, whilst supportive and loyal to the Revolution and Islam to varying degrees, considers women’s rights a priority.

I call the first group “power-seekers” and the second “rights-seekers.” Power-seekers have formed parties or wings within existing parties. Loyal to the dominant Islamic Republic’s discourse, these women try to obtain a position in the male-dominated politics of the Republic. In their speeches, they refer to the achievements of the Islamic Republic in areas like education, employment and the overall improvement of female participation in the society. The increased percentage of women’s involvement in these areas is considered a source of power for these women activists and gives them a bargaining opportunity to get hold of higher managerial positions within the government.

The rights-seekers who have experienced more ups-and-downs in comparison, have their foundations in civil society. While power-seekers move in similar circles to their male comrades in different parties from traditional to reformist, rights-seekers have evolved from private elite gatherings in the 1980s to NGOs in the 1990s, staffed by women and reaching out to women. The Khatami government gave them the space to deepen their roots in Iranian society and become more organised and efficient.

While a part of this movement remains wary of power politics (and is considered an opposition group by some in power), other parts of the movement have understood that by focusing on basic rights of “all” women they can obtain the support of ordinary women, and thus play a role in power politics. The one-million-signature campaign is a good example. The campaign, inspired by a sister campaign in Morocco, aims to gather one million signatures to change the discriminative articles about women in the Iranian law. Young women have knocked on doors in cities, towns and villages to share a small booklet about discrimination in Iranian law. In addition to the petition itself, this campaign also aims to raise awareness of the issues through the process of collecting the signatures, and there are signs that it is helping to push women’s issues further up the political agenda.

But what makes the 2009 presidential elections in Iran special is that more pragmatic factions of the power-seekers and the rights-seekers are coming together for the first time. Putting their differences aside, they have formed a coalition that aims to place women's issues high on the political agenda during this election. This coalition will not encourage women to vote for a specific candidate but its task is to make sure that all candidates have included the coalition's two basic demands in their campaign. First, the coalition seeks ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the Parliament. Second, it seeks changes in specific articles of the constitution that do not assure equality between women and men.



The 'Change for Equality' logo of the One Million Signatures Campaign

These presidential elections have been a catalyst for a change within the female movement. In addition to the emergence of this coalition, there are several new trends that promise to exercise an important influence on politics in the Islamic Republic. Women's role in electioneering had been limited to working in a campaign headquarters in order to get the female vote out in support of a particular candidate. Now, women activists are sitting at the negotiation table with the candidates and articulating their demands. Whilst in the past females whole-heartedly supported this or that candidate, now their support is conditional on the extent to which their demands and concerns are addressed. Where female activists looked for a ministry or a high-level managerial position for women, now they seek recognition of the rights of "all women" in the society; they want power for each and every woman. Having previously worked within male-dominated political mechanisms, now women regard themselves as an independent "social movement". Reducing the emphasis placed on women's role in the family, this coalition seeks women's rights in all aspects of social and private life. And most important of all, women have learned the need to institutionalise their power.

As Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, a distinguished women's rights activist tells me in an interview: "We definitely want a woman minister, but right now we do not have any power. In ten to twenty years when women enjoy their basic rights, may be we can think of a minister... now it's time for building a powerful civil society". Gholamhossein Karbaschi, the head of Karoubi's election headquarters, stated that in the past women were allowed to have a voice in candidates' campaign but today there is a big shift in the "quality" of their demands. "They know what they want and they lobby for it", he stressed.

Marzieh Mortazi Langeroudi, a women's rights activist addressing the meeting of the coalition, said, "Social movements do not politically support this and that candidate, we are moving from person-based to programme-based approach. Our mission is to increase the quality level of citizenship in the society."

A rights-based coalition led by women's rights activists is not the only novelty of the upcoming elections. For the first time after the revolution, first ladies have started to play a role in the election. While Ahmadinejad's camp calls it westernisation and the current president's wife does not even have a photo of her full face, Mir Hossein Mousavi, one of the reformist candidates, held his wife's hand, posing for photographers after the registration as a presidential candidate in the interior ministry. Zahra Rahnavard, Mousavi's wife, an artist and a university professor, has written two short articles supporting the idea of Iran joining the CEDAW.

Fatemeh Karoubi, Karoubi's wife, is Director General of a pragmatic reformist party and has also supported her husband's policies. Karoubi has issued a "citizenship rights' statement" and has addressed many of the coalition's demands. The wife of Mohsen Rezaei, a conservative candidate, also attended her husband's registration as a candidate. But although there is a more public presence of women in these elections, their roles are still very conservative and limited.

While women are finally out of their social shells shouting for their rights and abolishment of historical traditions, it still seems that Iranian politicians are steps behind this dynamic movement. This time a vague promise of a powerless seat in the cabinet seems unlikely to quench women's thirst for equality.