

Sample chapter from

We Are Iran

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1

A Virtual Community

In September 2001 Hossein Derakhshan, a young Iranian journalist who had recently moved to Canada, set up one of the very first weblogs in Farsi, his native language. (For the uninitiated, a weblog or blog is a kind of diary or journal posted on the Internet.) In response to a request from a reader, Hossein created a simple how-to-blog guide in Farsi. With the modest aim of giving other Iranians a voice, he set free an entire community.

Today Farsi is the fourth most frequently used language for keeping on-line journals. There are more Iranian blogs than there are Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese or Russian. According to the 2004 NITLE Blog Census,¹ there are more than 64,000 blogs written in Farsi. A phenomenal figure, given that in neighboring countries such as Iraq there are fewer than 50 known bloggers.

Blogging in Iran has grown so fast because it meets the needs no longer met by the print media; it provides a safe space in which people may write freely on a wide variety of topics, from the most serious and urgent to the most frivolous. Some prominent writers use their blogs to bypass strict state censorship and to publish their work on-line; established journalists can post uncensored reports on their blogs; expatriate Iranians worldwide use their blogs

¹ The NITLE program crawls through the web using statistical analyses, with an algorithm that identifies blogs and their languages.

to communicate with those back home; ordinary citizens record their thoughts and deeds in daily journals; and student groups and NGOs utilize their blogs as a means of co-ordinating their activities.

17 November 2004

I keep a weblog so that I can breathe in this suffocating air . . . In a society where one is taken to history's abattoir for the mere crime of thinking, I write so as not to be lost in my despair . . . so that I feel that I am somewhere where my calls for justice can be uttered . . . I write a weblog so that I can shout, cry and laugh, and do the things that they have taken away from me in Iran today . . .

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The worst that could happen to a blogger in the West is that they might be looked upon as self-absorbed 'cyber-geeks' or 'anoraks', but in Iran – a country that Reporters sans Frontières called 'the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East' – honest self-expression carries a heavy price. In the last six years as many as 100 print publications, including 41 daily newspapers, have been closed by Iran's hardline judiciary.

In April 2003 Iran became the first government to take direct action against bloggers. Sina Motallebi, a journalist behind a popular weblog (www.rooznegar.com), was imprisoned. His arrest was just the beginning and many more bloggers and on-line journalists have been arrested since. As Reporters sans Frontières put it: 'In a country where the independent press has

to fight for its survival on a daily basis, on-line publications and weblogs are the last media to fall into the authorities' clutches.' They add that through arrests and intimidation, 'the Iranian authorities are now trying to spread terror among on-line journalists' (16 October 2004).

Intimidation such as the arrest of Sina Motallebi's elderly father or the accusations of adultery against on-line journalist Fershteh Ghazi. According to Reporters Without Borders, five other imprisoned web journalists, 'Javad Gholam Tamayomi, Omid Memarian, Shahram Rafihzadeh, Hanif Mazroi and Rozbeh Mir Ebrahimi are expected to be accused of having sex with her. Some of them are said to have been forced to sign confessions. Such accusations by the authorities are common against political prisoners in Iran' (29 October 2004). Adultery is a crime punishable by stoning.

In October 2004, while several Internet journalists and bloggers were held in undisclosed locations awaiting trial, Ayatollah Shahrudi the head of the judiciary, announced new laws expressly covering 'cyber crimes': anyone 'propagating against the regime, acting against national security, disturbing the public mind and insulting religious sanctities through computer systems or telecommunications would be punished'. This announcement was accompanied by a number of articles in state propaganda newspapers such the *Keyhan* daily, which 'exposed' the Iranian blogosphere as a 'network led by the CIA conspiring to overthrow the regime'.

Sina Motallebi (*right of picture*) – the first blogger in the world to be imprisoned for the contents of his blog – in the summer of 2002 with colleagues at the *Hayat-e Nou* newspaper. Soon afterwards the newspaper was closed down, along with more than 100 other publications. Sina has left Iran and lives in Europe with his wife and son. However, according to Reporters sans Frontières, the authorities arrested his father in September 2004 in an attempt to silence the now-exiled blogger.



Photo © Hossein Derakhshan www.vagrantly.com

Sina Motallebi (above far right) - the first blogger in the world to be imprisoned for the contents of his weblog - during the summer of 2002 with colleagues at 'Hayat-e Nou' newspaper, that was soon after closed down alongside over a hundred publications. Sina has left Iran and lives in Europe with his wife and son. Yet 'Reporters sans Frontieres' reported that the Iranian judiciary had arrested his father during the September of 2004, with the aim of silencing the now exiled blogger

The crackdowns suggest that the regime is determined to curtail freedom of speech in cyberspace. Yet faced with a judiciary prepared to stone someone to death to silence them, an increasing number of blogs are now written anonymously. Additionally, many political Internet sites have gone underground, making them even more radical and critical.

Yet despite the very real risks, there are some bloggers who still write under their own names. Bijan Safsari was editor-in-chief and publisher of several independent pro-democracy newspapers – all of them shut down by the regime. Each time one of his newspapers was closed down, it quickly resurfaced under a new name. Eventually, this game of cat and mouse got Bijan thrown

into jail and now that there are no other venues where he can write or publish, he keeps a blog.

18 February 2004

There are those such as [Muhammad-Ali] Abtahi [the Iranian Parliamentary ex-Vice President] who have called our virtual community too political and have said that we should use weblogs for their intended use . . . that is to say, for clichéd daily diaries . . . So what if we use our blogs in ways not intended for or defined during the distant conception of this medium?

At a time when our society is deprived of its rightful free means of communication, and our newspapers are being closed down one by one -- with writers and journalists crowding the corners of our jails . . . the only realm that can safeguard and shoulder the responsibility of free speech is the blogosphere.

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According to data from the World Bank (2001), Iran has more personal computers per 1,000 people than the regional average. Estimates of the number of on-line users range from four million to seven million and growing. However, experts maintain that these figures do not reflect the current reality, because every month thousands more Iranians buy computers and go on-line. The number of Iranians on-line is likely to more than double again in the next five years, in a country where two-thirds of the population are under 30 and many are already technologically savvy.

Interestingly – even ironically – thanks to the education policies of the Islamic Republic, those who enter further education tend to be from a wide cross-section of Iranian society; and many of these students throughout Iran, all of them from very different social and regional backgrounds, have access to the Internet at their place of study.

20 July 2003

Has everyone noticed the spooky absence of graffiti in our public toilets since the arrival of weblogs? Remember the toilets at university we used to call our ‘Freedom Columns’?

Email: pythonir@yahoo.com

<http://python.persianblog.com>

1 May 2003

My blog is an opportunity for me to be heard . . . a free microphone that doesn’t need speakers . . . a blank page . . .

Sometimes I stretch out on this page in the nude . . . now and again I hide behind it. Occasionally I dance on it . . . Once in a while I tear it up . . . and from time to time I draw a picture of my childhood on it . . . I think . . . I live . . . I blog . . . therefore I . . . exist.

Email: deltangestan@yahoo.com
<http://deltangestan.com/>

12 January 2004

This is a personal note of gratitude to Hossein Derakhshan, the ‘Godfather’ of Iranian blogs, who opened up the world to a society . . . proving that even a 30-year-old Iranian, with merely the aid of a notebook and a connection to the Internet, can make a difference . . . So much so that according to a *Guardian* newspaper report [18 December 2003] he is deemed one of the top 15 international figures ‘whose weblogs have caused the biggest stir both in and outside the blogosphere’.

Within only a two-year period his tireless efforts have led to tens of thousands of Farsi blogs . . . a phenomenon that I believe will eventually influence our awareness, our personas and our lives . . .

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In recent decades analysts, academics and journalists have had little or no real access to Iran. So they have at times relied unduly on partial inquiry and the images presented by State propaganda. Dan De Luce, the *Guardian*’s correspondent in Iran for more than a year, was expelled from the country by the Iranian government in May 2004. As he puts it: ‘Stifling the flow of information means that the nuances of Iranian society are often obscured to the outside world. Any foreigner who visits Iran is struck by the gap between the reality of Iranian society and the image cultivated by the regime.’ (*Guardian*, 24 May 2004)

Yet through the anonymity that blogs can provide, those who once lacked voices are at last speaking up and discussing issues that have never been aired in any other media in the Islamic world.

30 October 2003

Islam is compatible with democracy*

*Subject to terms and conditions

Email: weblog@ksajadi.com

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Iran's burgeoning on-line communities have been able to evade the cultural and political restraints regarding speech, appearance and relations between the sexes; restraints which are strictly enforced in public. As researchers such as Babak Rahimi² have revealed, websites and blogs have made it possible for young Iranians to express themselves freely and anonymously – especially young women. The Internet, 'as an advancing new means of communication, has played an important role in the ongoing struggle for democracy in Iran', says Rahimi, and 'has opened a new virtual space for political dissent'.

Voting Against 'God's Representative on Earth'

² 'Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran' (MERIA, September 2003).

In recent years the Iranian people have demonstrated their desire for change by overwhelmingly voting for those parliamentary candidates who promise democracy. The Islamic hardliners have a single campaign theme: the principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution will receive a fatal blow if the reformers are victorious.

In the 1997 election campaign Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, the Speaker of Parliament, enjoyed the implicit endorsement of the Supreme Leader, who is deemed by the ruling clergy to be 'God's representative on earth'. Nearly 80 per cent of eligible voters participate and a massive 70 per cent of them voted for the little-known cleric Muhammad Khatami, giving his reform agenda enormous backing, while at the same time voting against Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, ignoring the endorsement of God's representative on earth.

President Khatami gained the overwhelming support of the Iranian people because of the consistent message of his speeches: 'There are those . . . who concede no change . . . Their God is their meagre and dim perceptions, which fight all the people's demands in the name of religion . . . God forbid that one day our people will feel the authorities are not meeting their real demands and that dirty hands have succeeded in disappointing them and thus alienating them. Then, no military, security or judicial power will be able to save the country.' In two subsequent presidential elections, President Khatami won 77 per cent and 70 per cent of the vote, with approximately 20 million votes cast. He succeeded everywhere, in every demographic group – he even carried Qom, the religious bastion of Iran.

But change has been totally blocked by the hardliners who keep hold the real power through the judiciary and the Guardian Council (a conservative supervisory body). They have demonstrated their formidable power by

abolishing the reformist press, vetoing parliamentary and election candidates, and arresting, torturing and assassinating many liberals and student activists.

8 January 2004

You have heard the story of my generation many times. A generation that grew up with bombs, rockets, war and revolutionary slogans . . . A generation that had battle-green grenade-shaped piggy banks . . .

The girls of my generation will never forget their head teachers tugging hard at tiny strands of hair that somehow fell out of their veils to teach them a lesson. The boys of my generation will never forget being slapped five times in the face for wearing shirts with Western labels on them . . . all of us have hundreds of similar memories . . .

My generation is the damaged generation. We were constantly chastised that we were duty-bound to safeguard and uphold the sacred blood that was shed for us during a revolution and a war. Any kind of happiness was forbidden for us . . .

My generation would be beaten up outside cinema queues or pizza restaurants . . . punished in the public parks; kicked and punched in the centres of town by the regime's militia . . . I will never forget the militia's Toyota vans and the loudspeaker announcements in Vali'Asr Square: "We will fight against all boys and girls!" – shouting those exact words!

Who can forget? For my generation talking to a member of the opposite sex (something quite ordinary for the new generation) was akin to adultery and its punishments are better left unsaid. These are just partial moments in all of our bitter lives: each and every one of us could write a book about them.

But I also remember the start of the reform movement. This same generation would distribute election pamphlets and posters for Khatami. And even for this we were reprimanded and beaten, but we stood up for him so that one day hope might come. It's unfair to say he did nothing . . . we got concerts, poetry readings, carefree chats in coffee shops and tight Manteaus. But is this all that my generation wanted?

It was also during this time that student activists were thrown in prison, newspapers were shut down – and yet Khatami was silent . . . it was at this time that the students of my generation were labeled hooligans and Western lackeys . . . and again Khatami appeared to agree through his silence . . .

Even the subsequent parliamentary elections of reformists did not bring any benefits for my generation. Under the almighty shadow of the Guardian Council, sometimes hearing the words of the enemy from the mouths of those you considered friends has been even harder to bear . . .

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dentist.blogspot.com

The unelected Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the conservative clerics and lawyers control the courts, the army, the media, political councils and the powerful Islamic foundations (*bonyads*) that very nearly run the economy. In February 2004 the conservatives banned more than 2,000 candidates from running in parliamentary elections, dropping any pretence at democracy and reasserting full control over the State.

13 February 2004

One of the greatest blessings of the Islamic Republic has been that we no longer hold anything sacred . . .

In 1935 the monarch Reza Shah, a secular modernizer, issued an edict that declared the wearing of traditional dress (for both women and men) an offence punishable by a prison term . . . As hard as Reza Shah tried, he could not have done what the ayatollahs have recently achieved . . . it has gone so far that today's burgeoning youth, supposedly ruled by the 'representative of God on earth', now even deny the existence of God himself.

<http://weblog.omila.com>

The Children of the Revolution

Those who lived through the Islamic Revolution almost a quarter of a century ago are now a minority. More than 70 per cent of the nation is under 30, and for this population, literacy rates for young men and women stand well over 90 per cent, even in rural areas. Notably, more than half of those graduating from university in Iran today are women.



Young Iranians at a shopping centre.



Photos © Yalda Moaiery www.kargah.com

Iran's younger generation has been completely transformed through the Islamic Republic's education policies of free education and national literacy campaigns. Paradoxically, this has created an educated and politicized youth with voting rights at 16 – and they are ready and willing to express their frustration.

Yet today, just as Muslim women elsewhere in the Islamic world are once again taking up the veil, it is the norm in Iran to see young women trying

to keep their covering to a ‘legal’ minimum. They have turned the veil into a mark of protest. Twenty-five years after the Revolution, its boldest and most vocal opponents are the children of the Revolution. The Iranian authorities want to shield young people from the ‘cultural onslaught’ of the West, but this has only made them more curious about – and almost fixated upon – the foreign culture they are being denied.

‘Many Iranians, even those on very limited incomes, own illegal satellite dishes that give them instant access to American television,’ explains the veteran journalist and writer Elaine Sciolino (*Persian Mirrors*, 2000). ‘CDs, videos, and computer programs are pirated and sold on the streets for a fraction of their price in the United States. E-mail is more widely available in Iran than in many other Middle Eastern countries.’

19 July 2003

There will come a day when every single thing will be put right . . . There will be no censors filtering blogs . . . If they show a veiled woman on TV . . . They will chequer the TV screen . . . Then you and I . . . will walk the streets till dawn, with a bottle of Champagne . . . That is, if your mum lets us!

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<http://acetaminophen.persianblog.com>

Iranian girls discussing happenings in the blogosphere



Cartoon © Hamidreza Nasiry

For a quarter of a century Iran has been a laboratory of political and social experimentation. It has also experienced what no other Muslim state has experienced in the twentieth century, namely two decades during which ideological, revolutionary Islam co-existed with what could be called a more 'secular' dimension. In this mixed public space debates, inquiries and even some reforms proved possible. By exposing Islam to public criticism, the Iranian Revolution has made possible discussions about religion, values and the relationship between religion and society.

8 August 2002

What have the likes of me learned after 12 years of formal religious education?
What is the outcome of being consistently bombarded with sacred information
in this Islamic Republic of ours?

1. When you talk about your religion for over 20 years, its problems will be highlighted.
2. Religious education is the best way to create agnostics in the modern world. Just look around at the people you personally know who went to the infamously strict Islamic schools, like Haghani, Kamal, Moofid, etc.
3. Even those most addicted to religion will at some stage overdose.
1. 4. The problem is not with Islam but with a few of our radical fellow Muslims.

The other day I saw a construction worker fast asleep next to a cement mixer; he appeared to have developed a deaf ear to all that noise. After so many years of being bombarded with religious facts you just stop hearing them.

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After a visit to Iran in 2002, Professor Jürgen Habermas said of future social developments there: ‘Nobody knows . . . You would, for example, have to have a greater insight into the thoughts of young women, above all those with an academic background. Women already comprise over half the student population. How many of them would take off their headscarves in public if they could? Do these heads contain a powder keg that the regime of the old ayatollahs has to fear more than anything else?’³

16 June 2003

At last it’s over. I’ve spent the last five years in the nasty hell-hole of May’boad.* But it’s over . . . I’ve packed my things and moved back home.

I remember when I started my course at that so-called university . . . we must have been the first group of single girls entering that God-forsaken place and setting up on our own . . . so many times coming home and washing the spit of passers-by off my clothes . . . they just could not tolerate our shameful headscarves . . . without exception then, all the native women used to wear chadors . . . They say that things are changing and extremists are getting more tolerant . . . a friend of mine even thinks that we started a revolution here . . .

It’s been just five years, but the same shopkeepers who would refuse to serve us if we were not wearing a chador now have teenage daughters who dress more provocatively than we ever dared to . . . Looking around this tiny town, only five years later you see that many of the local young girls have shed their black chadors.

³ ‘The Unrest Is Growing’, interview with Jürgen Habermas, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (18 June 2002).

We did not start a revolution here. Our ‘allegedly Reformist President’ did not bring about a more tolerant society . . . Societies evolve and change and it’s the ordinary people that change them . . . 70 per cent of our population is under 30 and many just don’t want to live like their parents used to . . . Eventually they will have to . . . not just tolerate us . . . but also live by our rules . . .

By Borderline

* May’boad is a tiny desert town; as part of the realization of the Islamic Republic’s policy of ‘higher education for the masses’, universities have been set up throughout Iran

21 September 2003

When most of our people are fed up and, according to the Government’s own figures, 11 per cent have no income at all . . . And we still don’t know anything about the state of the students they arrested after last term’s mass demonstrations and . . . then to be treated with contempt during my registration at Shahid Beheshty University . . .

The first thing they noticed was my make-up!!! Scrolled across my Conduct Form: HEAVY MAKE-UP!!! And started telling me that I would be answerable for this in the after-life!!! Is wearing make-up cannibalism or something?!!!

What about all our corrupt government officials? Will they ever be answerable to anyone?!!!

They're saying our veils are getting too small. 10 cm is too small? Why don't they make the boys with long hair cover their heads!!? Hair is hair!!! Anyway we have to burn these veils!! So don't bother wasting your money buying the stuff . . .

By Water Lily

20 November 2003

Yesterday I bought a turquoise ring . . . They say it brings you happiness . . . I didn't let my boyfriend buy it . . . I bought it myself.

I wanted to be the creator of my own happiness, beauty and freedom . . . The era of fairy-tale heroes has come to an end.

Email: myownsroom@yahoo.com

<http://myownsroom.blogspot.com>

3 June 2003

Do you have a fantasy that can never fade away?

I want to be with a man who would talk to me rapidly in Italian . . . While not understanding a word of it, to know what he means in the depths of his eyes . . . and to just nod my head in agreement . . . Farsi words have become so shallow for me.

I want someone who speaks a different language. I want us to be able to use our hands, eyes and our heat, as words can be very treacherous. Very.

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<http://khanoomgol.blogspot.com>

One of the major attractions of blogging in Iran is that it enables young people to bypass many of the strict social codes imposed on them by the theocratic regime. The Internet makes it easy to socialize, flirt, tell irreverent jokes, arrange dates and keep in touch. Popular young bloggers such as ‘acetaminophen’ (see below) offer us a snapshot of the underground landscape of their lives.

7 December 2002

Eid-e Fetr at the end of Ramadan is the only Eid when everyone’s happy. For those who have been fasting for a month and those of you who have been having secret tortuous lunches, Happy Eid!

22 March 2003

– Darling you look beautiful tonight . . .

– But you’re still the same trash that I’ve had to put up with for a lifetime . . .

I prefer it when my beloved parents at least communicate, as it's so boring when they totally ignore each other . . .

24 March 2003

Do you have a boyfriend? No I write a weblog instead . . .

2 October 2003

I dreamt I was Cinderella, everything was going really well until the king's envoy appeared and announced to my wicked stepmother: 'We must see all the girls in this household, the prince has been assassinated and the only piece of evidence left by the assassin is this glass slipper.'

7 December 2003

Sin or whatever . . .

I've fallen in love with myself . . . but I can't work out whether it's the real thing or I'll end up taking advantage of myself . . .

Email: farshiid@gmail.com

<http://acetaminophen.persianblog.com>

21 July 2002

This is my situation.

For my love a suitor has come via her family.

But so that no one can know about our love

She is forced to see him a while before rejecting him.

A forced relationship with my hateful rival.

And I who am privy to all her secrets and the soothers of all her pains

Am burning in my lover's fire.

Email: fiftypercentnormal@yahoo.com
<http://www.goldoon.com/>

8 March 2003

My good deed of the day:

I came across a cockroach in the kitchen today (I don't want any of you out there thinking we have cockroaches in our house, because we don't – it must have got in through a window or something), but out of the total kindness of my heart I ignored it and let it escape . . .

I'm glad Mum wasn't in the kitchen to see this as she would have said: 'What? Have you fallen in love again?!?!' Mum thinks the only people on earth who don't kill cockroaches . . . are those who have just fallen in love!

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Cultural Invasion

In recent years social scientists have observed that young Iranians are caught in the conflict between globalization and tradition. Their formal education and the state media try to keep them in line, but Islamic revolutionary values are being challenged by a ‘Western cultural onslaught’: the Internet and satellite television have opened the world to Iranians. Twenty-five years after the Revolution, Iran has a young, educated population – in particular an assertive generation of educated women who are entering previously forbidden domains.

At home in Tehran



© Amirali Ghasemi 2005, amiralighasmi.com

Photo © Ramin Rabii

The Morality Police have enforced the rules of the regime: no alcohol, no dancing and no pop music – bans that are still in force today. The intention was to create ‘soldiers for Islam’, but now groups of young people who aspire to a more Western lifestyle have turned such culturally alien events as St Valentine’s Day into a local festival. According to one report on 14 February 2003: ‘Tehran’s traders were rubbing their hands on Thursday after seeing sales of perfume and other gifts soar ahead of St Valentine’s Day, the new cause for celebration for young lovers in Islamic Iran.’ Meanwhile, Iranians such as the blogger Massoud Borjian have made the day their own.

14 February 2004

For us Iranians who rarely have moments for real tranquillity and calm free from turmoil, 14th of February, Saint Valentines Day has become the best excuse to remember our beloveds...

As Hafez [Persian poet (1326–1389)] has said:

Truthfully I admit, with much joy and such glee
Enslaved to love, from both worlds I am free

Congratulation on the Eid of lovers

For we Iranians who rarely have moments of real tranquillity and calm free from turmoil, the 14th of February, St Valentine's Day, has become the best excuse to remember our beloved.

As Hafez [a Persian poet (1326–89)] once said:

'Truthfully I admit, with much joy and such glee,
Enslaved to love, from both worlds I am free.'

Congratulation on the Eid of lovers



Massoud Borjian

Email: borjian@gmail.com
<http://borjian.blogspot.com/>

Scanning through the Iranian blogs on 14 February, one comes across numerous references to Valentine's Day. Iran has been overwhelmed by the rapid growth of this alien tradition and it has been hotly debated in the Press. In the *Sharg* newspaper on 14 February 2004, Davood Penhani writes that 'Valentine Day or as they say the Day of Lovers, a totally Western tradition, is gradually entering the hearts of the youth of the East. Just glance at the shops scattered around town selling presents for this European celebration and you can grasp the reality.' What has happened to a society that at one time was 'willing to go to battle for its cultural identity', but is now so 'receptive to the traditions and customs of strangers' that it shows 'no fear of forgetting its own national and religious customs'? This is the key question for Iran: is this healthy or is it dangerous for Iranian society and culture?

Valentines Day in Iran



© Atieh Noori, www.kargah.com

While many within the establishment regard such trends as a crisis, others take a more pragmatic approach – among them the Iranian reformist ex-Vice President and mid-ranking cleric Muhammad-Ali Abtahi, to judge by his own blog.

12 February 2004

It has become a custom of ours to have a day that represents love and life . . . this custom like many other traditions has been imported to our country. Even though many have raised objections to this . . . we cannot deny the reality.

Nonetheless, friendship and love are entwined with our history and literature . . . and the Islam that I know encourages life and love.

<http://www.webneveshteha.com/>

14 February 2003

These days on every street you are confronted by many shops laden with countless varieties of cuddly toys piled up in their windows . . . everything plastered with an 'I love you' message for Valentine's Day . . . with flocks of young girls and boys huddled around these shops breathlessly consulting about what to get . . .

But what has this Valentine got to do with us? However hard I look into our history I can't find a tradition, date or anything that is similar to this . . . We have countless lovers in our stories and poetry, but no day like Valentine's Day when we express love . . . So because we don't have such a thing must we borrow from those nearby? Like all other things? Like the way we dress, our behaviour, dances and music?

This culture of ours is so totally mixed up that I don't know where it will end . . . In direct opposition to those in charge, people are now readier and readier to distance themselves from their own culture, no matter what . . .

Email: awat_hiva@yahoo.com

<http://awathiva.persianblog.com>

Science tells us to be detached and objective, but sometimes the truth is subjective and fully involved in the issues that matter. When so much of the

attention directed at the Islamic world is focused on violence and terrorism, blogs offer outsiders a fresh perspective on the lives of ordinary men and women, relaying their experiences – their fears, dreams, disappointments and insecurities – while allowing others to eavesdrop on the clandestine conversations of a closed society.

29 October 2003

My daughter wanted to get her nose pierced. I resisted and told her that she was bound to regret it and that she should wait until she was a bit older and then decide for herself. She looked at me then and said: ‘Piercing your nose is no big deal. Maybe I will in the end regret it . . . but that’s not the whole world. It is a small wish. By banning me . . . you’re turning a small wish into my ultimate dream. Why do you want me to have such insignificant dreams? If I can fulfil these small wishes and not grow up with such trivial dreams, don’t you think I will have a better life waiting for me?’

*

We too had such insignificant wishes and even when we grew up they didn’t come true . . . There were so many times we wanted to go somewhere and they wouldn’t let us and it became a dream. So many times they even stopped us from running. It came to the point that we weren’t even allowed to take small steps . . .

This is Iran. You hear my voice from the land of the most compassionate mothers . . . mothers who break your legs for fear that you may hurt your ankle

walking on our very hard pavements . . . Mothers who are more terrified than you are. They bring you up as cowards and riddled with guilt . . . This is Iran, where all our ‘mothers are destined to the heavens’* . . . and every single one of us . . . when we become mothers, we turn into the most compassionate mothers the like of which no one has ever encountered anywhere else on earth . . . monumental dams . . . In the name of compassion, worry, future outlook . . .

This is Iran. When a mothers says ‘Don’t’, you don’t leave; and when she says ‘Die’, you die.

This is Iran and when you don’t ever... there is not a whiff of shame or humanity about you ...

This is Iran. Mothers have to worry . . . they have to be anxious . . . and they have to break your legs.

Email: faeze_am@yahoo.com

<http://faeze.blogspot.com>

* A quote attributed to the prophet Muhammad.

21 August 2003

At times it’s been hard getting used to being a widow, with the children all away . . . My grandchildren come over as much as they can . . .

Yet at last he’s back – the two years he’s been away have been hard. Still, he has experienced national service and being away from home . . . now I’m no longer alone and there is someone that I can discuss many things with. There is a lot of happiness in having a young person at home. Your fridge has

to be full . . . You have to think about cooking, and get to have the sound of the washing machine in the background all day long.

Nothing is under your control any longer and you have found a powerful contender . . .

And when you say, ‘Give me some peace to write my blog.’ He says: ‘Look at you, the trendy young rebel, keeping a blog . . .’

Siavash, my dear son, welcome home.

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Portrait of My Grandmother (2003) by Atieh Noori



© Atieh Noori, www.kargah.com

Upholding Iran's Morality

Much to the disappointment of the regime, 25 years of revolutionary rule have still not created those model citizens who were supposed to slavishly adhere to strict moral laws, dress codes and the rules governing contact between the sexes. In fact, the laws have to be enforced by the Morality Police who roam the streets of Iran. In the summer of 2002 this force was strengthened with the creation of Special Units (*Yeganeh Vizhe*), the newest group among an already large number of volunteer, semi-official and regular police organizations that concern themselves with enforcing public morality. These Special Units are a startling spectacle: armed men in shiny black four-wheel-drive vehicles all dressed up with smart black berets to match their cars. Their arrival was hailed in the local press as a means of combating what is referred to as 'social corruption among the young'.

22 April 2003

The patrol cars that put fear in the hearts of our youth . . . the militia forces that are there to safeguard national morality . . . the effect has been the total opposite and today our youth hold nothing sacred . . .

For 24 years our youth have lived dual lives . . . the way they have to behave in schools and official places in stark contrast to their home life . . . private lives are the total antithesis of the dictates of the ruling clergy . . .

This has created dual personalities for many people . . . with the improvements in modes of communications like video and Internet . . . our awareness and our identity crisis has only intensified . . .

National security in ideological and totalitarian regimes can be endangered even by dressing in a way that is not in harmony with the rules . . .

In a system where the leaders do not have the people's backing and keep power by force . . . these leaders are terrified of the smallest things . . .

We are all painfully aware of the manifestations of this totalitarian system . . . its absolute need to influence every aspect of the life of its individual subjects, and to produce people of uniform thoughts, while opposing free thought and democracy . . .

Blogger Sina Motallebi was arrested and charged with jeopardizing national security! You have to pity a regime whose national security can be jeopardized by the writings of a blogger! Or perhaps laugh . . . Jeopardizing national security by writing about art and literature!

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Soon after the Iranian Revolution, observing the hejab (Islamic dress) and wearing the veil became mandatory for all Iranian women. But laws are regularly updated. The Martyr Godousi Judicial Centre's 1997 dress-code guidelines called for prison terms from three months to a year – or fines and up to 74 lashes with a whip – for wearing 'stylish outfits, such as suits or a skirt without a long overcoat on top'. The regulations ban mini or short-sleeved overcoats and the wearing of any 'depraved, ostentatious or sparkly object on hats, necklaces, earrings, belts, bracelets, glasses, headbands, rings, neck scarfs and ties'.

Here is Atash (Fire) describing her encounter with the Morality Police.

25 May 2003

I could feel the searing sun like a piece of burning coal on my veil . . . My veil and my long robes make me smell like a corpse . . . I walk on the street but can't see the end . . . Far, far away, a group of trees are doing a choreographed dance . . .

And I, on the street, I'm walking . . . Passers-by, those in cars, can't see me, as if I'm here but I'm not . . . Far, far away, I can see a mirror that has taken up the width of the street . . . And the nearer I get to it the more distant I become . . . I'm walking in a scorching heat that rips the breath out of you . . .

I catch a glimpse of myself, lighter, lighter and lighter . . . With each step in my mind's eye, I no longer feel the burden of my walk.

I'm wearing a white short-sleeved top, green shorts and a scented straw hat . . . I no longer smell like a corpse or like my grandmother's damp basement.

I walk freely and am spreading my fragrant sweet dreams among people who cannot see me . . . They're running to get away from the harsh, searing sun . . . What ecstasy . . .

There is a hand on my shoulder that abruptly swallows my world . . . The toxic street voice with rage barks: 'Pull your veil forward!' I hear it, but I don't want to hear it.

The street filth put his hand in his back pocket to show that he's searching for something . . . His mime does not frighten me. He pulls out a transmitter from his putrid shirt pocket and this time pointing at his black patrol van, with fury, hollers: 'What do you say now?'

As I was stranded between two worlds . . . at high noon . . . I was hungry and thirsty . . . in an endless street where right at the end the trees were

doing a choreographed dance . . . My veil moved and came forward . . . A few steps away my veil moved back again.

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The enforced dress codes for men and women are a symbol of the will of the regime. Iranians are fully aware of these laws, but look around any city centre in Iran at random you will see that many disregard the regulations and use their appearance to make a protest, despite the serious consequences. Girls mock the strict guidelines by wearing their compulsory headscarves way back over their head to reveal as much (illicit) hair as possible; meanwhile the obligatory *manteau* gowns are getting shorter and tighter, to the point that they are no longer the black cloaks considered the ideal revolutionary hejab.

Girls buying shoes



© Yalda Moaiery www.kargah.com

The morality laws also permit judges to mete out discretionary punishments to those who, among other gross infractions such as being found in possession of alcoholic drinks or lying to the authorities, hold hands or kiss publicly . . .

28 October 2003

Do you have ‘the Heart’?

This game of theirs started when they were first married . . . Mum and Dad were making their way home one winter’s night . . . They didn’t have a car then and had to wait a long time by the roadside for a taxi. Apparently, my dad on impulse had kissed Mum on the lips . . . anyhow, a car had stopped and picked them up . . . Once inside they’d noticed that the driver was staring at them in his rear-view mirror and laughing to himself. Well, this had really irritated my dad, so he’d asked the man what he found so amusing. Evidently he had seen them kissing and was full of admiration for them . . . According to Mum, the whole journey home he praised Dad so much, telling him he was a true lionheart . . . ‘You really have heart.’ He told Dad that he was the bravest man in the whole of Iran and had gone on about it so much that for a long time Dad really felt as though he was the bravest man ever . . .

Now for years whenever Mum is in a playful mood in the oddest of places she fixes her eyes on Dad and asks, ‘Do you have the heart?’ They giggle, look around, weigh up the situation, then they kiss and then they have a good laugh. My dad always seems to have ‘the heart’ . . .

Recently we were standing in a long bustling queue outside Cinema Savaz in Karaj . . . Mum was sure that she would get the better of Dad and he would not have ‘the heart’ this time . . . She turned to him and teasingly asked, ‘Do you have the heart?’ Even though Dad at first seemed hesitant, he paused a few seconds, had a good look around . . . but he eventually turned to her and kissed her on the lips . . . suddenly a couple of people in the crowd started clapping and whistling and soon pretty much the whole queue were applauding . . .

My brother, of course, was fuming (this game of Mum and Dad’s always annoys him), but it doesn’t bother me and I’m happy that my dad always has ‘the heart’!

I wish more men had his ‘heart’!

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A young couple holding hands in Shiraz, Iran, 2002



© Ehsan Shahin Sefat, www.ehsanshahin.tripod.com

Although the Morality Police are still very much out in force, in recent years there has been a dramatic relaxation of the regime's strict official codes of dress and conduct. The morality laws have come a long way since the early days when women's lips were cut with razors in public view to deter others from wearing lipstick.

18 October 2003

I don't like to think back to my childhood days . . . there are some things that happened back then that I am still dodging . . . Still, some memories always stay with you . . . Between the ages of four and eleven I had a favourite tree . . . Its sturdy trunk and powerful branches were the place for my childhood solace . . . It was from the top of this tree that I first set eyes on the girl next door, in her summery outfit and short skirt.

Bygone memories of my childhood friend, the scent of jasmine, Grandfather, Grandmother . . .

At the age of six I started school . . . My Mother would always clean all the make-up from her face, pull on thick black tights and cover herself completely from head to toe in black before leaving the house . . . I would complain: 'Why are you doing this to yourself, it's embarrassing, why can't you go out as you are at home?'

She would always laugh and say, 'They will arrest us . . .'



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I found out later, that everyone feared being arrested . . . I even understood this better when a woman jumped out of a muddy-coloured car and with a razor took off the lipstick from the lips of a girl . . . a girl who looked a lot like the girl next door . . .

During those first days we were being transformed . . .

Now years have passed and my father and mother's generation are called the 'burnt generation', while we are now referred to as the 'rebellious generation'.

By Underground

Hezbollah: the 'Party of God'

Ayatollah Khomeini set up Hezbollah or the 'Party of God' a quarter of a century ago as the only official party of the ideological state. Ironically the 'defenders of the faith' that control Iran often complain of being marginalized by the 'immoral masses' and appear consistently disturbed by the country's changing society.

A 2004 editorial in *Yal'Saratal-Hussein* (an official publication of Iran's Hezbollah) is typical of this hysteria. It is addressed to the security forces, the Interior Ministry and the head of the judiciary, and warns that, 'at this speed, in a few years, this country will overtake Turkey in the immorality stakes and in the percentage of women unveiled. Be warned that today we are confronted with the prospect of drowning in the quagmire of corruption and vice.' It continues:

[[DISPLAY PROSE EXTRACT]]

If you still believe that the veil is the prerequisite of Islamic honour, but you can no longer deal with the sleazy law-breakers, announce this to the devout so they can go out and defend the laws of God. Believe us when we tell you that those that we see disobeying God's rules do so intentionally as a fight against a religious government. Believe us that what American warships cannot even imagine creating in Iran – the control of this country and our youth – the bare arms, the nude legs, the immoral made-up faces and bare heads – is already happening here. We ask you in the name of everything that you hold sacred to safeguard the honour of this nation. Deal with this colossal tidal wave of immorality! Don't keep saying that it's impossible! Stop saying that we do not have the resources! All it requires is to hold on to our honour dearly and to do a bit of thinking.

[[END DISPLAY PROSE EXTRACT]]

Today many believe it is impossible to hold back the burgeoning youth culture, so the Iranian regime has been forced to grant young people a limited degree of social freedom. While activities such as holding hands on the street or wearing make-up are still classed as crimes, the authorities sometimes turn a blind eye. Yet the introduction of armed Special Units in their black berets in the summer of 2002 shows that the ruling clerics remain determined to combat 'social corruption among the young' whenever they can.

16 October 2003

I was about to be picked up by the Basij [a volunteer force of religious vigilantes] today . . . a couple of puny guys . . . couldn't have been older than 17 . . . One flashed his Basij card and told me that I was a shameful spectacle . . . that I either take off my make-up and tighten my headscarf or he was taking me in . . .

I? A spectacle? A vision of loveliness . . . Absolutely . . . But you know what the Basij are like . . . they see beauty in other bearded men . . .

Fine, I'll admit it . . . I was a bit scared . . . But I remembered what a friend of mine had done a few weeks ago. She had started protesting and people had come to her rescue . . . and I also thought there is no way I am taking notice of two smelly rats, especially as I was meeting some friends later on and my make-up was just too perfect for words today . . . (I'm not being big-headed or anything . . . it's just that I can never spend longer than five minutes putting on my make-up and I usually get it wrong . . . but today I looked good.)

Mirdamad Street was pretty busy. I wasn't the odd person out . . . they were . . . So I just started screaming . . . Within seconds, a crowd had gathered . . . The great thing is that no one looked scared and everyone was poking fun at them . . . a middle-aged couple that I have never met even claimed me as their daughter and started telling them off. The man was really good and kept saying, 'How dare you even address my daughter, you dishonourable rogues?'

At first they kept threatening that they were going to call for back-up and the whole crowd would be taken away . . . but the crowd just got bigger and bigger . . . so they told my lovely new mum and dad to take their daughter

and go home . . . So, it ended well . . . but I wish some gorgeous man would have claimed me as his wife for the day . . . well, that's life . . .

Moral of the story: next time you get stopped, do as I did today . . . the less we give in the more likely they are to leave us alone . . .

(But don't be stupid either . . . make sure they are not armed or the Special Units . . . as it's just not worth it.)

BY Arched Brows

[[end of chapter 1]]
