Green Women of Iran: The Role of the Women’s Movement During and After Iran’s Presidential Election of 2009

Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani

Introduction

The aftermath of Iran’s fraudulent presidential election of June 2009 is well-known to the world by now. After massive protests against the rigged election, the government and its security forces brutally attacked the peaceful demonstrations of people in the streets of Tehran and other cities. In what is now understood as the first popular uprising after Iran’s revolution of 1979, we saw women, religious and non-religious, traditional and secular, young and old, rich and poor, in fact women from all walks of life, at the forefront of these protests, at times even outnumbering men.

Watching images and videos from these demonstrations, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Iran’s body politic was invaded by feminine power. The extraordinary peaceful heroism of women demonstrators has awakened us in the West to the massive presence of women in Iran’s Green Movement. What I saw, and millions others around the world had a glimpse of, was women marching in thousands, chanting, singing, holding hands, carrying banners and defying the police, military forces, basij militia and plainclothes agents (all part of the multi-layered and extremely complex security machinery that the Iranian regime has managed to assemble in the last thirty years) through peaceful and nonviolent means. These are scenes to be remembered, cherished and pondered for a long time to come. We all witnessed how these brave women were beaten up, arrested, and killed; many are now in jail, many have gone into hiding and many others are among the dead, some murdered in cold blood by snipers. The world watched Neda Agha-Soltan, a twenty-six year old philosophy student who participated in a peaceful demonstration in Tehran, bleeding to death with a single bullet in her heart. Her image came to epitomize both the victimization of Iranian women and their courage, agency and self-determination in writing their own history.

From the systematic nature of these targeted killings of women in the street we now know that these murders were committed as a technique of intimidation to create an atmosphere of fear among families, especially among the more traditional segments of Iranian society, who are usually fearful of their young females’ presence in the public. Recently, there have been several reports, some from the highest members of the clerical establishment, that point at routine rape and sexual assault of arrested young men and women in Iran’s prisons.

The presence of millions of women in these demonstrations speaks volumes about the gendered bodies physically enunciating their existence as women in the public sphere. The majority of Iranian women are young (70% of Iran’s population is under 30), educated (63% of university students in Iran are women), and literate (the literacy rate among women is 90%). There are currently more than 40 women’s groups and more than 700 women civil and human rights activists in Iran. The Iranian women’s movement, in its three long decades of struggle, has shaped and influenced the democratic aspiration of Iranians in content, method, philosophy and even in the aesthetics of its resistance. I want to argue that what we are witnessing in Iran is a logical consequence of years of active participation of women and
the presence of feminist thoughts and ideals that have been carefully crafted, taught and disseminated at the grassroots level and have informed women’s lived experiences. There is now a mutually reinforcing relationship that has organically grown between the women’s movement and the general democratic struggle of the Iranian people. Young Iranian women, contrary to their mothers who, for various reasons, could not form an independent women’s movement, have now created an indigenous, grassroots movement whose ambition goes far beyond formal legal equality with men. Contrary to the Iranian revolution of 1979 in which women participated in supporting roles, behind men with no gender platform or demands of their own, today women in the streets of Iran are mainly fighting for their equal rights with men in all spheres of social, cultural and political life. The majority of these women are now equipped with a feminist consciousness which has grown out of decades of women’s struggles in Iran. In this process, they have not only made themselves and their own demands visible, but they have greatly influenced the Green Movement’s direction, content, philosophy and mandate. In this paper, I want to outline and discuss the major roles played by women in the recent popular uprising in Iran.

I. Women and the Democratic Aspirations of the Green Movement

The Iranian women’s movement of the last three decades is at the heart of a democratic movement; it is the main contributor to a move towards the democratization of the social, cultural and political life in Iran. As such, it has contributed greatly to the growth of civil and democratic aspirations of Iranians. Let me be clear; by democratic aspirations I mean aspirations to basic rights and freedoms such as people’s civil and political rights, including the right to assemble, the right to free and fair elections, the right to rational governance, the right to participate freely and equally in the political process, and the right to be equal under the law. I also mean individual rights, such as freedom from unnecessary intervention into an individual’s private life, freedom to choose one’s lifestyle, clothing, the right to be different and the right to self-determination. These issues have been, for years and in many different trains, fought by individual women and women’s organizations in Iran. Therefore, the recent post-election uprising, although it started as a simple demand for a ballot recount, quickly turned into a struggle between democratic forces, religious and secular, and a dictatorial regime determined to continue its undemocratic rule. This move for democracy must not be misunderstood as an off-shoot of Western liberal democratic projects. It is very much indigenous to the Iranian cultural and social landscape, traversing the divide between the modern and the traditional that has plagued Iranian socio-political thought for over a hundred years.

As the women’s movement came to realize that women’s demand for equality and self-determination need not be divided along ideological lines, such as secularism versus religion, the recent Green Movement in Iran freely borrowed from the heterogeneous fabric of Iran’s rich Islamic, pre-Islamic, national and secular heritage and discourses. For example, since the 1990’s various women’s NGOs, magazines, web publications and specific campaigns such as One Million Signatures and Stop Stoning Forever Campaign have worked relentlessly to advance women’s rights in different spheres. Women members of these organizations and campaigns come from all walks of life, both Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and secular. Instead of focusing on their political or ideological affiliations, these women consciously, and against many odds, decided to come together over common issues and problems. For example, One Million Signatures is a campaign against gender discrimination in the Iranian legal system. By obtaining one million signatures, this movement aims at pressuring the state...
to recognize the equality of men and women in all laws of the land. This network of women has used both modern and traditional forms of activism, lobbying and advocacy in order to put pressure on the government and its various niches of power.3

What distinguishes these efforts from the previous women’s movements in Iran is the coming together of women from every ideological camp and cultural lifestyle around specific issues. Through years of struggle, Iranian women have learned how to build alliances across difference—a truly democratic practice. And their broad coalitions are aimed at transcending, but not erasing, class, religion, ideology, age, ethnicity and so on. What I want to emphasize here is that the Iranian women’s movement and the Green uprising in general is neither strictly Islamic-traditional nor a flight towards a Western-style liberalism. Indeed, one can see the democratic aspirations coexisting alongside more traditional forms of social organizations, behaviours and practices.

Slavoj Zizek, in his recent article on Iran, points to the flawed interpretation of Iran’s Green movement as a battle waged by pro-Western reformists against Islamic hardliners. He rightly argues for a framework that would enable us to see the nuances and the heterogeneity of the Green movement. However, Zizek’s assertion that Iran’s Green movement is a return to the unfulfilled ideals of the 1979 Khomeini revolution or as he puts it “in Freudian terms, today’s protest movement is the ‘return of the repressed’ of the Khomeini revolution”4 also misses the point. My generation, who were the architects of the 1979 revolution, did not have democracy as its priority. The main slogan of the 1979 revolution “Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic” (of course, this slogan rhymes perfectly in Farsi!) clearly demonstrates the main direction and objectives of that revolution. Needless to say “freedom” in the above slogan did not necessarily mean individual rights and freedoms, but rather freedom from the tyrannical rule of the Shah’s monarchy. In contradistinction, Iran’s current Green generation, especially its young women participants, have democratic demands as their first and foremost goal. Therefore, if this is any sort of a return to the 1979 revolutionary spirit, it is as Derrida would have it, a return that does not go back to its original place; it is rather a displacement and a re-reading of events, places, people and desires in order to enable a population to leap forward into making its own history.

II. Transcending the Divide between Tradition and Modernity

The millions of women who participated in the recent rallies and demonstrations came from religious and non-religious backgrounds equally. They were participants in the struggle against a regime determined to erase any traces of republicanism from the political landscape of the nation. The real objectives for this women’s movement are the concrete, specific issues pertaining to the democratic demands of the people. What ties these women to each other in the streets of Tehran and elsewhere is not whether or not they believe in Islam; similarly, what places them into two opposing camps is not whether or not they believe in Islam. What brings these diverse women together is their resolve to achieve freedom and equality for all, their determination to exercise their civil rights, to have their vote be counted, and to be considered equal actors in Iran’s political process.

One example that clearly reveals the multifaceted nature of this movement is the existence of religious and secular symbols in demonstrations alongside each other, none overshadowing the other. It is important to note that secular and religious signs and symbols were and still are employed as rhetorical strategies by both the people and the regime. An example is the regime’s use of the former national anthem “Ey Iran” in order to appeal to mass nationalist sentiment or the use of images of modern-looking women holding Ahmadinejad’s pictures.
On the other hand, every night when people chant “Allah o Akbar/God is great” and “shame on dictator,” they are, in fact creatively, employing both religious and secular significations in order to communicate their peaceful resistance to the fraudulent election, to express their objection to the brutal crackdown of their dissent, and to gain legitimacy for their movement.

In fact, all the evidence points towards a creative use of religious rituals and imaginative re-readings of Islamic and non-Islamic religious texts by the people. The ancient wisdom of Zoroastrianism has survived alongside more recent Islamic teachings and is deeply rooted in the collective Iranian psyche and it still plays a powerful role in how people relate to one another in their private and public life. Many people were seen carrying signs with the guiding Zoroastrian principles “good thoughts, good words and good deeds” written on them. At one point, I witnessed a young woman who carrying a placard with these words written on it, place the placard right in front of the face of an angry soldier, inviting him to read the words and calm down.

Further, what seems to be distinct and different from the revolution of 1979 is the purpose for which religious sayings are used in the public sphere. Whereas in 1979 religion was mainly used to mobilize people for radical and militant struggle against the late Shah of Iran (and for economic justice and independence from superpowers), this time around people are referring to their religious texts and traditions in order to demand individual rights and freedoms, gender equality and democracy and to promote the use of non-violence in the struggle to achieve these aims. This shift is important in two respects. First, it points to the fact that religious teachings are being read in a more inclusive and democratic spirit and second, that various religious traditions are slowly finding ways to peacefully coexist with each other in the public realm.

I want to maintain that the multiplicity of signs and symbols indicates the political maturity of the Green movement and its democratic potentials. This is the first time in Iranian history that democracy is both the goal and the process, preserving and respecting the plurality of voices and cultural expressions as it unfolds. What I want to emphasize here is that although religion plays a major foundational role in the collective imagination of Iranian people, it would be unproductive if we reduced the battle waged by the women’s movement, and by extension by the Green movement, into the battle between tradition and modernity, between Islam and Western-style secularism.

Examples of such a reductionist approach to the recent uprising in Iran come from some non-Iranian postcolonial thinkers and activists, some teaching and working in Western countries, others located in the Middle East. The basic tenets of their argument are that there has been no fraud in Iran’s election, that Ahmadinejad, who for them stands as an authentic anti-colonial figure, is the legally elected president of Iran, that the Green movement is a creation of Western media and is carried out inside Iran by an affluent middle-class who aspire to a Western life style and capitalist consumer culture. Aside from the obvious fact that no foreign media can orchestrate or organise dissent in Iran on such a scale, this misreading is at best dismissive of and insulting to millions of Iranians who took to the streets to fight for gender equality, civil liberties, and democratic rights. It is of course simple-minded to think that so many young men and women risk their lives in Iran’s streets merely for a “more Western consumer lifestyle,” as one commentator claimed. It is further ironic that the position taken by these writers coincides with the official narrative of the Iranian regime about the Green movement being imported from Western powers in the form of a velvet revolution. In the past thirty years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently crushed any voice of dissent, especially those of women, students and the youth, in the guise of the
fight against Western cultural imperialism. As one of its most repressive measures so far, the Iranian regime has branded all cultural exchange and dialogue with Western NGOs and human rights organizations an act of treason, and has detained hundreds of women academics, lawyers, social workers and civil activists under this false accusation. The complicity with this brutal treatment of Iranian people is extremely unfortunate, especially coming from those who claim to be post-colonial thinkers.7

The support of local dictators such as Ahmadinejad, mistaking them for authentic anti-colonial figures, thus offering theoretical justification for the oppression of millions of people, and interpreting the movements of opposition as offshoots of a Western colonial project point to a series of theoretical problems. I choose to focus the following discussion on two fallacies. The first fallacy is the inability to make an analytically clear and workable distinction between Western colonialism and the tremendous achievements in the domain of democratic rights and civil liberties obtained through decades of long and hard struggles by millions of ordinary people in the Western hemisphere, such as the right to freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, trade unions, human rights (however insufficient and culturally problematic), the ideal of gender equality and so on. To conflate the two produces into one another is an epistemic fallacy in which there is no critical distance between the colonial project and the democratic aspirations and achievements of millions of people around the world. This distinction is urgently needed, especially in the age of the digital revolution where for the first time in human history, millions of ordinary people around the world have a chance to enter into dialogue with each other and exchange ideas, culture, hopes, and dreams, lend support to each other, learn from each other, build alliances and networks, and work with each other on common political projects. To attribute such a universal over-determination to the concept of colonial power results in the inability to imagine, or work for, the possibility of mass movements in the “third world” who aspire to democratic ideals but at the same time retain a critical distance to colonial projects and their ideological constructions.8

The second, and more alarming fallacy revolves around the gender politics that ensues from such conflation. To reduce the claims of millions of mainly middle- and upper middle-class women in the third world to a demand for a Western consumerist lifestyle demonstrates the patriarchal nature and gender blindness of such knowledge production. This misreading prevents these writers from giving a thorough account of the oppressive gender practices in countries like Iran and, more importantly, it undermines the weight of small but significant restrictions put on a woman’s daily life such as her right to choose her own outfit or carry her gendered body the way she sees fit in the public sphere. What seems to be forgotten here is the fact that a woman’s seemingly insignificant expressions of her freedom, such as choosing the color of her dress or, dare I say, her favourite lipstick or nail polish, presupposes a more fundamental form of agency and control. A woman’s ability to make these seemingly trivial choices assumes a woman’s relative control over her own body and her lived experiences, instead of being dictated, controlled and managed by a state-run religious doctrine which leaves no corner of her life, and her body, out of its legal reach. For many decades, the liberatory discourses of countries such as Iran have been dominated by a patriarchal, male-dominated voice that set the priorities of struggle according to its own vision and its own formula. The Iranian women’s movement, and the individual women who participate in the Green movement are engaged in a transvaluation of Iran’s social and cultural values, including a re-ordering of priorities according to which Iran’s democratic movement should be proceeding.
III. The Women’s Movement and the Non-Violent Spirit of the Green Movement

The majority of women and men who put their lives on the line to participate in mass demonstrations insisted on non-violent and peaceful means of resistance. Ramin Jahanbegloo, who in 2006 spent 125 days in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, mostly in solitary confinement, describes the latest uprising in Iran as “a major nonviolent movement in a Gandhian style.”

Indeed, what happened on the streets of Iran was a massive, nonviolent, civilian uprising. I want to bear witness to Jahanbegloo’s assertion by adding my own story. As an eyewitness to almost all the rallies and demonstrations in Tehran up to June 25, 2009, I particularly remember one of these rallies, which epitomised the incredible political maturity and non-violent spirit of Iranian people. On Thursday, June 18, hundreds of thousands of people marched in complete silence for kilometres, many clad in black and with taped mouths as a sign of their silent mourning. What seemed incredible to me was the fact that none of the insults and provocations from the plainclothes agents, who would occasionally attack the crowd, broke people’s resolve to proceed non-violently and in utter silence. The power of silence was turned into an effective tool, a radical liberatory force, against the state’s security forces. In many other rallies, people brought flowers and gave them to anti-riot police and other security forces; on more than a few occasions, I saw shame and embarrassment on the faces of these police officers when confronted with such acts of hospitality and kindness from the people. In many of their slogans, people addressed the army personnel and police officers directly, calling them “brothers,” or “part of the people,” asking them to support their cause, and inviting them to join with them.

What I want to add is that this Gandhian moment was in accordance with values patiently advocated by the women’s movement for the last three decades. Iran’s Green movement owes much of its non-violent spirit to the women’s struggle. Unlike workers’ movements and, to some extent, student movements who have historically followed a more militant and confrontational style of resistance, women’s movements in Iran have always insisted on non-violent means such as peaceful campaigns, strikes, sit-ins, boycotts and civil disobedience to achieve social, cultural and political change in their struggle for gender equality. Millions of women who participated in Iran’s post-election demonstrations followed the same peaceful and non-violent spirit. In these rallies it was mainly women who acted as the buffers between, and the protectors of both male demonstrators and security forces. There were many incidents, some recorded and broadcasted, where women tried to protect both the riot police and the protestors, preventing them from being beaten or killed by each other.

In this context, one particular campaign that is worth mentioning is the Mourning Mothers, an ad hoc group formed in response to the widespread kidnappings, arrests and murders during recent demonstrations in Iran. They announced that they will gather every Sunday in a sit-in in four parks in Tehran until all their children are released from prison. They asked everyone to join by bringing flowers and pictures of their loved ones who had been either arrested or made to disappear. The regime reacted quickly; many of these mothers were beaten and detained during their first few sit-ins. What is astonishing is the fact that all the repressive measures could not stop these women from continuing their sit-ins. Women are still continuing their peaceful gatherings in these parks despite the harassment and arrests. The sit-ins of the Mourning Mothers are now the only continual weekly protest in Tehran. Some of the Iranian bloggers who talked to these mothers asked them how they could stop security forces from preventing their sit-ins. One mother replied that “at first, they treated us very harshly, but in response we gave them flowers, they came back many times, we still...
continued giving them flowers. Now, many of them just approach us, get their flowers and leave.”

The women’s movement is making a consistent attempt to broaden non-violent resistance so as to make it a fundamental moral value of Iran’s social and political life. This is a groundbreaking approach in the long history of civil struggle in Iran. Instead of reducing non-violence to simply a convenient strategy, the women’s movement’s aim is to turn it into an overarching ethical value that governs the process, the strategy, and the goal of people’s democratic aspirations.

IV. Women’s “Coalition” and the Presidential Debates: A Case Example

In April 2009, a few months before the election, for the first time in Iranian history, women formed a broad coalition which brought together civil rights advocates, NGOs, political activists, and women who were active in presidential campaigns, media, and trade unions under one banner. Instead of supporting one specific candidate, a customary practice followed by many civil and political organizations, the coalition presented their issues to all four contenders and demanded a response from each.

This was a significant leap forward for the women’s movement since it was the first time that women used the pre-election period for advocacy and raising awareness, as well as to oblige the presidential candidates to publicly announce their position on existing gender equality in Iran. Using the relatively relaxed pre-election period, and banking on people’s intense engagement with the political process at the time, women activists crowded into shopping malls and onto streets discussing and debating their issues with bystanders. Other women activists used their lobbying techniques and media muscles to disseminate and publicize women’s demands in order to illicit some response from the four presidential candidates and to find support among influential political figures in parliament and other governmental bodies. These initiatives made women’s issues a major topic of debate during the election for the first time in the last three decades.

The coalition also focused its platform on a few central demands rather than raising numerous general issues; this again, was a novel initiative. In a country where gender inequality and sex discrimination prevail in all aspects of life, political groups, civil institutions and the women’s movement have all come to learn to ask for everything when they get a chance. Over time, women have learned the futility of this strategy since ignoring general and vague demands by politicians and those others who hold power in Iran has proved to be much easier. This time, the coalition had two narrow and specific demands, first, to make Iran a state party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and second, to eliminate all discriminatory laws against women. The outcome of this initiative was a turning point in Iranian political history and from which much should be learned by other civil movements in Iran.

All four candidates responded to the coalition’s demands and three of them responded favourably. Mr. Ahmadinejad himself kept silent but his representative responded with an attack on CEDAW as being against Islam, and on Shirin Ebadi, the prominent activist lawyer and Nobel Peace Laureate, accusing her of westernizing Iranian culture. The other three promised, at least in words, to address gender inequality and sex discrimination in the law, the education system and the workforce. One of the contenders, Mr. Karoubi, the only clergy candidate, went as far as to promise he would do everything in his power to sign on to CEDAW. In a broadcast and highly publicized interview, Mr. Karoubi also addressed...
polygamy and forced veiling in Iran. Considering the fact that the term “forced veiling” had so far no place in the official discourse in Iran, the sheer fact of its utterance by one of the most important members of Iran’s political and religious establishment had a significant impact on raising the issue of women’s choice with regard to clothing. Again, for the first time in Iran’s presidential elections, the main candidate, Mousavi, also issued a written statement in which he outlined his platform of reform in regards to gender discrimination. In it, he also promised to review all discriminatory laws and to join CEDAW while adhering to Islamic and cultural values.

Even with its limited success, this campaign had a profound impact on young Iranian women. Energized by this public and formal recognition of their issues, many were encouraged to participate in subsequent rallies and demonstrations. Although the coalition did not participate in the post-election protests under its own banner, it was evident that its pre-election campaign offered a positive role model for civil advocacy. It raised women’s awareness and took their issues to the general public. It contributed immensely in encouraging and empowering women to publicly protest the election result. Further, by showing the efficiency of raising specific and focused demands in civil and political activism, it gave impetus to the Green movement to be much more focused; the short, focused and effective slogan of the Green movement – “where is my vote” – indicates the impact of the women’s movement on the general direction of this civil protest. I believe it is in reaction to this successful campaign that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad felt pressured to announce, on August 16, 2009 that he plans to appoint at least three women ministers to this upcoming cabinet. Again, this is the first time after the 1979 revolution that women would be serving as ministers in a cabinet. The impact of women’s pressure becomes more evident if one considers the fact that Ahmadinejad’s support mostly comes from religiously devout sections of Iranian society, a population who may become extremely discontent by these appointments and withdraw their support of Ahmadinejad.

The Iranian women’s movement will continue to play a major and decisive role in Iran’s journey towards democracy and political self-determination for years to come and in its non-violent struggle it will change Iran’s social, cultural and political landscape.

NOTES
1. I was fortunate enough to be in Iran two weeks prior to and ten days after the election. I was invited by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tehran to give a talk on Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics. During my stay, I had the chance to meet many young Iranian students, including many courageous women. I also participated in rallies and demonstrations both prior to and after the election. Therefore, part of my writing and analysis is informed by my own observations and experience of Iran’s Green movement, especially of the youth and women who form its core.
2. For the BBC report, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8192660.stm.
3. You can visit One Million Signatures’ website for additional information about the campaign and sign the petition at: http://www.campaignforequality.info/english/.
5. For two examples of such analysis, see Azmi Bishara, “An alternative reading,” Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, June 25–July 1, 2009, no. 953, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/953/op1.htm; and Partha Banerjee, “Iran Turmoil And Media Propaganda,” Countercurrents.org, June, 24 2009, http://www.countercurrents.org/banerjee240609.htm, accessed on August 13, 2009. It is interesting that in order to advance his argument about Iran’s Green movement as a fabrication of Western media, Banerjee extensively quotes Noam Chomsky who has supported the Iranian Green movement from the start. Chomsky personally attended the hunger strike in front of the United Nation in New York on July 22–24, 2009 in support of the Iranian people. He was also one of the 200 intellectuals and human rights activists who signed a letter sent to Mr Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general of the UN, demanding the UN take
action on Iran’s brutal repression of its dissidents and its violation of human rights. To view the letter, see http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/aug/12/iran-ban-ki-moon-protest.


7. One notable counter-example is the Iranian U.S.-based, post-colonial academic, Hamid Dabashi who views the Green protest as Iran’s civil rights movement and has consistently supported the recent uprising in both his writings and activism. However, I do not agree with Dabashi’s assessment of Mousavi as the Gandhi of Iran. Indeed we are witnessing a Gandhian non-violent moment in the streets of Iran, a point which I will discuss further in the paper. Yet this “Gandhian” moment is initiated and carried through by Iranians in the street, and is the result of years of peaceful and non-violent struggle of Iran’s civil society, such as the women’s movement. But there is no Gandhi figure in Iran yet.

Further, I have serious reservations about Dabashi’s analysis of Iranian society, especially his categorization of the youth as post-ideological. Iranians, in particular the youth, seem to be very much aware of the ideological apparatus, including the coercive nature of official discourse on Islam, and have a pragmatic approach to using these different ideologies as rhetorical tropes towards achieving their goals. But deep in Iranian society there are ideological and cultural divides and tensions between the middle- and upper middle-class and those of the poor and underclass echelons of society, with the former aspiring to more democratic ideals and the latter still holding to a traditional understanding of social organisation and whose priority revolves around a just economic policy. To my mind, this rift is more or less reflective of the economic reality of Iran, which is marred with extreme class inequality and an unjust distribution of economic resources. Therefore, contrary to Dabashi’s analysis, the rift still calls for an account of ideology, an analysis of Iran’s political economy, and more importantly the mutual reinforcement between the two. For a recent analysis by Dabashi, see Hamid Dabashi, “People power,” Al-Ahram Weekly On-line, June 25–July 1, 2009, no. 953, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/953/op121.html.

8. Unfortunately, this misguided support of “Third World” dictators with their anti-American, anti-colonial facade is not limited to a few self-proclaimed post-colonialists. Some from the left tradition make the same erroneous judgment. A few weeks ago I received a public announcement about Barbara Epstein, a prominent board member of Monthly Review who resigned from the board, objecting to the MRZine position on Iran. To my mind, this is just one example of how the progressive left expresses its profound discontent with such erroneous analysis on the left.


10. For the official website of Mourning Mothers, see: http://mothersoflaleh.blogspot.com/. For the Amnesty report of the brutal attack on the peaceful gathering of these mothers, see http://blogs.amnesty.org.uk/blogs_entry.asp?eid=3499.

11. In 2003 Iran’s hardline Guardian Council, for the third and final time, rejected an attempt by Khatami’s reformist government to pass the International Women’s Treaty, the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In Iran all laws must be ratified by the Guardian Council after it passes parliament.

Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani is Assistant Professor of Women & Gender Studies in the Department of Humanities at the University of Toronto, Scarborough. Her most recent publications include “Levinas, Nietzsche and Benjamin’s ‘Divine Violence’” in Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics (2006) and the forthcoming “Does Levinas Justify or Transcend Liberalism?: Levinas on Human Liberation,” Journal of Philosophy and Social Criticism (2010).