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Le Monde diplomatique
english edition mondediplo.com

November 1996

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ISLAMIST AND SECULAR WOMEN UNITE

Iranian women take on the mullahs

As the divide continues to widen between Iranian civil society and the state which emerged from the Islamic revolution, women are among the first to be calling for the updating of religious thinking and recognition of their rights. The debate, which Iranian women of all classes are following with intense interest through the mass-circulation women's magazines, sets intellectual women from both the Islamist and secular camps - united for the first time - against the conservatives who defend an obscurantist and reactionary concept of Islam.

By Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut

Faezeh Rafsanjani is head of the Council for Solidarity in Women's Sport in the Muslim countries. Sitting in her office in a wealthy district to the north of Tehran in blue jeans and a black chador, she asks "What's the difference between being president of the republic and running a government department? None. They're both executive jobs. So why can't a woman run the country when she can be head of a government department?"

The courageous young Tehran deputy, youngest daughter of the President of the Islamic Republic, is angry because she says Iranian traditionalists are planning to prevent women from standing for the highest office. Miss Rafsanjani points out the ambiguity of the constitution: interpreted literally, it allows a woman to stand for the post. In setting out the conditions for standing, Article 115 uses the term *rajol*, which applies to a man but also to a recognised personality. Words - and through them interpretation of the Koran and Islamic laws and traditions - have acquired political meaning.

Like many Iranian women who want to see progress, Miss

Rafsanjani rejects the rigid reading of Islamic teachings adopted by the religious and political authorities. She calls for their reinterpretation, saying "It's not Islam which forbids women from attaining office, but the interpretation of its teachings by the clerics." She challenges texts whose original ambiguity has been removed, such as Articles 5, 107 and 163 of the Constitution, which grant men the exclusive right to religious and legal leadership of society, and the law which denies women office.

Shahla Sherkat, editor of the women's magazine *Zanan* (Women), goes further: she demands the reform of religious thinking in the interests of a feminist reading of Islam. "Given the problems which women face, a radical change in the law is needed," she says. "Since several articles of the Civil Code are based on the shari'a, then the shari'a needs to be reinterpreted and women should be involved in the process." Citing Abdolkarim Sorush, a progressive religious intellectual who has been influential during the post-revolutionary era and is called the Luther of Iranian Islam, she says "Some religious intellectuals have done an enormous amount of work on the subject and opened the way to an evolution of religious thought. Their success is sure to affect the position of women. We believe that our understanding of religion varies with each stage of history and that religious interpretation should take this into account."

Re-reading the Koran

In November-December 1992, just ten months after its launch, Zanan published a series of articles showing that the Koran did not forbid women from issuing religious edicts (fatwas) and allowed them, under the right conditions, to become religious, legal and political leaders. Masoumeh Ebtekar and Mamboubeh Ommi, editors of another women's magazine Farzaneh, emphasise the distinction between Islam and the patriarchal traditions on which certain articles of the law are based. They would like the religious reformers to remove the texts of articles which women do not consider authentic. These women belong to a new generation of Islamists which has emerged from the revolution. They want to adapt religion to the realities of a society in which women take an active part in economic, social and political life.

Nahid Moussavi (a journalist), Mehranguiz Kar (a lawyer), Shireen Ebadi (another jurist), Zhaleh Shaditalab (a sociologist) and other secular intellectuals insist that the Islamic revolution has improved the status of women who come from a traditional background. Ms Moussavi says "Many women from conservative families are taking courses in higher education and taking part in social, economic and political life. They want to increase their status. But if Islam is rigidly interpreted, they can't leave their homes without permission from their husbands or fathers. And if they talk to men outside their families, they must place a pebble under their tongue so their voices are indistinct. The presence of ten Islamist women in parliament who address men without pebbles under their tongues shows that, despite setbacks, these women have made real progress since the revolution".

In fact, to a certain extent Islamist women, no longer confined to

the enclosed world of traditional values, owe their new consciousness to the establishment of a religious autocracy and the application of religious precepts to family law. This has made wearing the veil compulsory, restricted the right to divorce and custody of children for divorced mothers, seen a return to a lower marriage age for girls (thirteen, then nine), legalised polygamy, made women bow to authority and to their husbands' commands, banned them from decision-making posts and so forth.

But while losing their civil rights, women have paradoxically retained the political rights granted them by the shah in 1963. Shortly after the new civil code came into force, the public and private sectors were "purged" of secular members who refused to submit to the demands of the Islamists. Although Islamist women took part in the war effort during the (1980-1988) Iran-Iraq war, the state still viewed them only as wives and mothers and did not recognise their role in society.

Gradually, a number of women who had joined the fight against secularism at the start of the revolution, realised that the regression was affecting all women, irrespective of their convictions. Having come to the fore during the revolution, these militant women now joined the struggle against sexual segregation. An activist who calls herself an "Islamic feminist" (and who prefers to remain anonymous), describes this new consciousness: "Women's rights have suffered setbacks, and even (Islamist) women revolutionaries have been kept out of the public domain. The authorities only needed us to hold street protests: once the revolution was over they wanted us go back to our homes. I realised then that revolutionary social activity loses its meaning when women lose their rights. That is how I came to defend women's rights."

With the end of a war which was blamed for every evil, a new period of so-called reconstruction began . Economic, social and demographic realities forced the state to change some of its attitudes. For example, it had to set about reducing the birth rate (one of the highest in the world) to cope with the economic crisis, since it no longer had the resources to meet the needs of the younger generation born under the Islamic regime.

Although both Islamic tradition and Iranian culture attach importance to large families, the state reintroduced family planning in 1988. Publicity campaigns encourage young couples not to have more than two children. Simultaneously, the end of the war with Iraq lessened the wartime need for self-sacrifice and devotion, leaving people free to express their own wishes. Under pressure from civil society, the government now allows relative freedom of the press: progressive Islamist women are taking advantage of this to publish magazines which voice the discontent of the female population. A solidarity is emerging between Islamist and secular women which goes beyond the divergences, opening the prospect of new forms of cooperation.

"We know that secular women do not share our convictions" says Ms Ommi of Farzaneh, "but this does not give us any problems, since we're all working to promote the status of women. We

Islamists have abandoned the idea that we are sole heirs to the revolution. We realise that our sectarianism during the early years led to the isolation of many competent women and this was detrimental to women in general. We want to make up for our mistakes." Ms Sherkat of Zanan tells the same story: "We must all tolerate and respect each other's convictions. Even if we don't share the same philosophy, the same beliefs and thinking, we can and should work together".

Despite verbal (and sometimes physical) attacks by the traditionalists, women are continuing to question the clerics' interpretation of these laws and of the Koran. This questioning has reached the holy cities: even the religious college at Qum is involved, as the publication of the women's magazine Payam-e Zan shows. The debate over basics is spreading, and with it the battle against the segregation of the sexes.

This shows in the current debates in women's magazines, and also in the positions adopted in the legislative elections of March and April 1996: a number of candidates were criticising the civil code and complaining that women were under-represented in administrative and political bodies. Many of the women seeking electoral support from their fellow-citizens were Islamist technocrats who - unlike the traditionalists, both male and female - favour greater openness to the outside world. Educated in Iranian or foreign, often Anglophone, universities, they have a decidedly modern vision of Islam that takes account of the social, political and cultural changes sweeping society.

Marzieh Seddiqi, a deputy from Mashad (the country's second city), is a young Islamist technocrat who runs an international transport firm. She was one of the founders of the Women's Affairs Office in 1992. The purpose, she explains, is to "detect problems and deficiencies and suggest ways of filling any gaps, improving the status of women and strengthening their economic, social, cultural and political role." In its first four years, this body got a number of articles of family law amended in order to protect more fully the rights of married or divorced women. Although limited, these reforms were not carried out. On the other hand, the exclusion of women from senior administrative posts was lifted and women legal advisers have recently made their appearance in the courts. For the first time, in January 1996, a woman became a deputy minister (of public health).

According to Ms Seddiqi, "a number of other women will shortly be appointed to equivalent posts, and there will more than likely be a woman minister in the next government". But women are still barred from becoming judges, and they are poorly represented in the top political and administrative bodies. Although Islamist women mobilised widely for the legislative elections, many candidates were not endorsed by the Council of Guardians (Shora-ye Negahbân). In some provincial cities, including Malayer and the country's third city Isfahan, where women had been elected in the first round, the results were declared void for no good reason. This means there are only ten women deputies - four per cent of the total - in the fifth Islamic parliament.

Against this background, it is easy to see why these timid steps have done so little to soothe feelings of insecurity, fear and distrust of the government among secular women. With their aspirations and way of life denounced as the incarnation of decadent Western values, it is secular women who are the first to be threatened by the revival of campaigns against "the Western cultural invasion and those who advance it in the land of Islam". These debates, which expose the state's inability to run a post-Islamist society, are being amplified by the growing numbers of "carelessly veiled" women.

Despite sanctions which can include imprisonment, the compulsory wearing of veils has not really had the results intended. Many women, especially younger ones (the very generation that has grown up under Islamist rule), demonstrate dissent by letting a few strands of hair show, wearing make-up or wearing more modern clothes. Their reluctance to wear long dark dresses, which anyway are unsuited to an active life, has led the organisation for the promotion of Islam to change its tack. At its clothes show in February 1993, dark materials gave place to brightly coloured fabrics, and the traditional Islamic veil to the coloured scarf worn by tribal women and peasants, as in the film Gabbeh.

This show was strongly criticised by traditionalists: but some "modernist" Islamists, like Shahla Habibi, head of the Women's Affairs Office, openly oppose making the chador compulsory, arguing that other forms of veil are possible. That was after the smash-hit success of an issue of Zanan whose front cover bore a photograph of a woman film director, very carelessly veiled and wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses; for the first time in its existence, the magazine had to order a second print run.

This sort of thing gives the traditionalists apoplexy. They would like to forbid women from taking part in some sporting activities in public - riding horses and cycling, for example - which might interfere with wearing the veil. "Women cycling," replies Faezeh Rafsanjani, "is neither illicit nor unlawful... This subject only became an issue because it coincided with the legislative elections and some people wanted to give it a political slant. Instead, their opposition led to a stronger demand for women cycling." As on other occasions, when under attack from the traditionalists, women have used every means to advance their cause.

By taking up this cause herself, President Hashemi Rafsanjani's daughter has become very popular with the young. But she has become the bête noire of the fundamentalists, who make her the butt of hostile articles and cartoons in their newspapers.

The scope of the battles won by women extends well beyond the spheres of the intelligentsia: the whole of society is feverishly caught up in them. Women are agitating on a daily basis, in the streets and in their homes. Despite the traditionalists' avowed intention to contain the movement, the emergence of a social identity among women has become irreversible. A great many Iranian women, whether secular or religious, are rejecting institutionalised inequalities and calling for a reading of Islam

More about Azadeh Kian-Thiébaut.

(1) See Eric Rouleau, La

which is more adapted to their lives. Involved in a struggle which transcends gender, they are contributing to the evolution of their whole society. As political Islam reveals its limitations and the divide between civil society and the state grows ever wider, only the reform of religious thought and opening up religion to modernity can avert a definitive rift.

AZADEH KIAN

République islamique dIran confrontée à la société civile, Le Monde diplomatique, June 1995.
(2) The recent film Gabbeh by Mohsen Makhmalbaf gives brilliant examples of these coloured fabrics, so far from the black preferred by the Islamists. By celebrating colour, Gabbeh underlines the Iranians' yearning for a more cheerful society.
(3) Sobh, no. 60, Tehran, July 1996, page 12..

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