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## Courage, Creativity, and Capacity in Iran:

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*Mobilizing for Women's Rights and Gender Equality*

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**Civic Power and Citizen Dissent.** In the policy world, the discourse of change is still based on the old "statist" model consisting of state actors or elites, top-down power, and externally prescribed "solutions" or interventions. Even the debate about hard versus soft power is about the actions of those at the top. People as an active force are not usually factored into the equation. Citizen dissent, expressed in nonviolent campaigns and movements, encompasses a different model of change—one that is bottom-up, inside-out, and homegrown.

The organized expression of citizen dissent harnesses a different form of power: civic power. It is expressed through the strategic use of strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, mass actions, non-cooperation, and over two hundred other non-violent tactics designed to influence the power establishment and disrupt the oppressor's sources of control and support. Mohandas Gandhi said, "Even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled:" Nonviolent movements succeed not necessarily when there are masses on the streets, but when citizens withdraw their cooperation from the status quo, refuse to obey, and thus undermine the sustainability of the existing system.<sup>1</sup>

Iran is home to one of the most innovative and tenacious examples of citizen dissent today. In Iran, women are effec-

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tively channeling their grievances into a strategic nonviolent campaign to end imposed gender subordination and fight for legal rights. Beyond its own vision of gender equality, the Iranian women's movement is expanding the frontiers of civic action on multiple fronts.

**Women in Iran: Contemporary Contradictions.** There are few places in the world where the position of women is more paradoxical than in Iran. Iranian women won the vote in 1963, well before Switzerland (1971) and Portugal (1976). Their life expectancy is 72 years, not among the highest, but higher than such democracies as the Bahamas (69 years), India (71 years), and South Africa (41 years).<sup>2</sup> The literacy rate for Iranian women is 70 percent (2002 estimate), which beats that of high-tech

another. They built new ties with student organizations, in part due to the strong presence of female students on university campuses. Those who received permission from their fathers or husbands attended major international conferences.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these improvements, Iranian women endure severe legal, political, social, and economic discrimination that the Khatami government was unable or unwilling to tackle. The Iranian legal system is governed by Islamic *sharia* law, and Islamic feminists challenge many of its interpretations. Under the Shiite Jaafari doctrine governing Iran, women's inheritance is half of men's. In a court of law, a woman's testimony and value in "blood money"—a form of reparations to a victim's family—is half that of a man. Women are legally obligated to obey their

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## The credibility of citizen dissent hinges on maintaining a nonviolent character.

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powerhouse India (48 percent).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, female university enrollment reached 66 percent in 2003, in comparison to 58 percent (2004) for their American counterparts.<sup>4</sup>

During the initial years of the "reformist" era, defined by the presidency of Mohammed Khatami from 1997–2005, the status of women modestly improved. Based on a platform of moderation and social change, President Khatami appointed women to government positions, including the office of vice president. Women's rights advocates established civil society organizations, launched two prominent magazines, and used the Internet and blogs to publish, debate, and communicate with one

husband's commands and must receive male permission to travel outside the country or obtain a passport. Polygamy is legal under *sharia* law; men are permitted to have up to four "permanent" wives and unlimited "temporary" wives. In the case of divorce, which can only be initiated by the husband, men are automatically given custody of boys over the age of two and girls over the age of seven.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Iranian women face state-sanctioned and domestic violence. Adultery is punishable with death by stoning. According to Amnesty International, women suffer disproportionately from this brutal sentence.<sup>7</sup> As of February 2008, nine women and two men await this fate. Offenders of

"honor" killings also benefit from reduced punishments for crimes of murder.

In the political realm, women cannot run for president, become the Supreme Leader, or serve as a member of the powerful Assembly of Experts, which appoints the Supreme Leader. In the social sphere, women are not allowed to sing in public, ride bicycles, or attend civic events. Women's rights activists assert that gender discrimination is a crushing force preventing women from succeeding in the professional world as well.

### **New Century, New Movement, New Threats.**

Over the past seven years, the Iranian women's movement has displayed tenacity and innovation under growing conditions of state hostility to any form of citizen dissent. The stirrings of rejuvenation began around 2001 and were initially fueled by disappointment with the Khatami government. Even among reformist women, expectations for progress were dashed. Some prominent figures from religious circles stepped forward to advocate for women's rights, most notably Zahra Eshraghi, the granddaughter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic revolution's leader, and Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of former President Akbar Rafsanjani.<sup>8</sup>

The 2005 presidential election marked a turning point for Iranian civil society. Under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a climate of fear and intimidation has taken over, which some are calling a "Second Cultural Revolution."<sup>9</sup> The regime is rolling back the modest social liberties established during the reform period.<sup>10</sup> Censorship is all-pervasive, from the media and

broadcasting to literature, arts, and the Internet. Independent media outlets have been shut down, civil society organizations harassed or closed. A recent Human Rights Watch report concludes that "the Iranian government is relying on its broadly worded 'security laws' to suppress virtually any public expression of dissent."<sup>11</sup> Expressions of citizen dissent are met with threats, accusations of collaboration with foreign governments, and detention. Student leaders, trade unionists, human rights defenders, and intellectuals are frequently sent to the infamous Section 209 of Tehran's Evin prison, a known site of abusive interrogations and torture.

Women have fared worse under President Ahmadinejad. A 2007 report states that 16,635 women were detained for "immodest" dressing, while 121 women's rights defenders—including a male parliamentarian—were arrested. A new university quota program has been instituted to reduce the number of female students. Legislation was introduced in parliament to change family laws that would push back the few legal rights that women have.<sup>12</sup>

### **Unity: The Movement's Participants and its Goals.**

Based on people power lessons over the past century, including the Indian independence movement, the U.S. civil rights movement, solidarity for free trade unions in Poland, and the civic anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa, nonviolent scholar Peter Ackerman has distilled three general elements for success that provide a framework through which to view the Iranian women's movement.<sup>13</sup> The first element is unity: unity around goals and around the people and groups wanting change.

A common challenge for civic movements is the interpretation of abstract objectives, such as human rights, democracy, or social justice, into tangible issues that are relevant to the everyday concerns of ordinary people in the movement's respective society. Building on an overall vision of gender equality, Iranian feminists have identified two core issues around which to rally: outlawing stoning and achieving legal equality. Both are significant because they focus on real concerns of women, such as child custody, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance. These concerns are universal, thereby cutting across social divisions of religious versus secular, Persian versus non-Persian, educated versus uneducated, and urban versus rural.

While women lead the movement, they also made a strategic choice to engage men in dialogue and as participants, understanding that there can be no systemic transformation unless a significant number of males embrace their demands for change and their vision for society. They developed targeted communication initiatives directed to potential allies within the system to garner their support for women's demands.<sup>14</sup> There was one key constituency, however, that they did not initially fully engage: the movement did not target ordinary citizens. This constituted a strategic shortcoming because civic power is derived from sheer numbers of participants. Though Iranian women's rights activists did attract some people to their cause, they did not build grassroots momentum.

**Planning: Organization, Tactical Sequencing, and Innovation.** The second element of success identified by Ackerman is planning, which involves organization, leadership,

and the effective use of resources. The catalyst for heightened coordination among women activists in Iran came in 2003, when Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. A lawyer, Ebadi founded the Children's Rights Support Association and was awarded the Peace Prize for her efforts to bring democracy and women's and children's rights to the forefront of Iranian political discourse. Upon hearing the news of her award, thousands of people spontaneously thronged the airport to welcome Ebadi home from a short trip abroad. A number of female activists who found themselves celebrating together decided to subsequently join forces and launched a new, informal forum for women to meet, plan, and act.<sup>15</sup> However, their efforts and those of Islamic women's rights advocates moved largely on separate, parallel planes. The secular-religious divide proved too great to quickly overcome; from a strategic perspective, it was a missed opportunity. Nonetheless, their collective activities had a mutually reinforcing effect in raising awareness and stimulating public discussion.

Planning also includes the selection, execution, and sequencing of a range of nonviolent actions designed to disrupt the system of oppression, communicate campaign messages, and win support for the cause. By the final years of the reformist era, the women's movement launched a surge of nonviolent actions that reflected a new capacity for tactical diversity and innovation. Women organized demonstrations, sit-ins, flash protests, and acts of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Azam Taleghani, the daughter of Ayatollah Mohammad Taleghani, challenged the edict against women running for the presidency by submitting an application for candidacy.

A daring group of young women identified a potent expression of *sharia* law that virtually every Iranian could understand: the exclusion of women from live soccer matches in a country where the sport is a national passion. On 8 June 2006, during the World Cup Iran-Bahrain qualifying match held in Tehran and broadcast live nationally and internationally, they executed what nonviolent strategists call a "dilemma action." Storming the barricades, they overtook a section of the stadium that was in view of television cameras. With some holding signs demanding justice and equality, they energetically watched the second half of the game.<sup>16</sup>

This tactic is designed to put the opponent in a lose-lose position and the movement in a win-win position. In this case, virtually every Iranian could identify with the women's motivations—a deep love of soccer and the desire for the right to support their national team. The authorities had two choices. They could forcefully drag the women out of the stadium, which would not only interrupt a major game but would be witnessed by millions inside the country and around the world, creating a negative image of the government and instilling sympathy for the women. Or, they could do nothing, thereby acceding victory to the women who showed they could defy a strict prohibition. They chose the latter. President Ahmadinejad subsequently rescinded the ban, but was then blocked by the Guardian Council, the powerful non-elected body that approves all legislation and vets electoral candidates. Though the final outcome was a stalemate, the women's actions were still a success: a group of determined women pressured the fundamentalist president to change his position on an entrenched policy.

### **Nonviolent Struggle, Repression, and Resolve.**

The third element of success is to adopt nonviolent discipline. The credibility of citizen dissent hinges on maintaining a nonviolent character. Only nonviolent methods can enlist the active participation of ordinary people, thereby building longevity into the struggle. Nonviolent discipline denies oppressors the excuse to crack down, so that if and when they do, they lose legitimacy. Finally, nonviolent discipline is essential to spur defections from the other side, since it is not possible to co-opt those you threaten to harm. The Iranian women's movement is consistently nonviolent, which lends it much-needed credibility.

By the end of 2005, as it became clear that the women's movement was gaining strength, regime repression soon followed. After Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency, women's rights activists tested the waters with three demonstrations. Organizers faced court summons and pre-arrests. Protestors were beaten, and many were arrested. Following a particularly brutal episode on 12 June 2006, leaders in the movement decided to halt all street actions.

This violent trajectory is common to many nonviolent struggles; though a group may be nonviolent, its opponent may not respond in kind. Nonviolent struggle defines the method of choice of the oppressed, not the behavior of the adversary. A violent response or crack-down does not indicate that nonviolent action has failed, but rather that the movement is perceived as a challenge or threat.

Violent repression, however, can also have the unintended effect of catalyzing a reassessment on the part of the move-

ment, potentially driving it onto a new strategic and tactical path. Such was the case with the Iranian women's movement, which is emerging from adversity with resolve and renewal.

### **Skills vs. Conditions: The One Million Signatures Campaign.**

When civic space—the arena for public expression—has been curtailed and conventional forms of citizen dissent are met with harsh measures, what options are left for civic movements? In the battle of skills versus conditions, lessons can be learned from Iranian women's rights activists.

After the Ahmadinejad crackdown, women activists first engaged in reappraisal by critically examining their own movement. They determined that one of its biggest weaknesses was the public perception that it was composed of elites based in Tehran. A strategist wrote, "We started to think about how to take our message to the grassroots, and to broaden our demand for reform of discriminatory laws, beyond the tight circle of elite communities, such as intellectuals, university students, professors, and women's rights activists."<sup>17</sup> Such widespread popularity is necessary for a dissent movement to grow and ultimately succeed.

Second, education had previously played a secondary role to activism. After the crackdown, leaders realized that not only is education itself a nonviolent tactic; it is necessary to generate civic mobilization. Third, they identified a central challenge facing most civic movements: how to tap and transform general discontent into effective action.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, they developed a decentralized leadership structure and support committees in order to build movement resilience.

Finally, with so few overt nonviolent actions possible, strategists recognized that they must develop alternative, low-risk ways for ordinary citizens to be involved.

From this collective strategizing emerged a sophisticated new plan of action: the One Million Signatures Campaign. Launched in August 2006, the direct goal is to "collect one million signatures in support of a petition addressed to the Iranian parliament asking for the revision and reform of current laws which discriminate against women."<sup>19</sup> The strategic objective is to "elevate the demand for change to an encompassing public demand," thereby creating a mass groundswell of civic pressure.<sup>20</sup> By refusing to retreat, the campaign immediately achieved a small but significant victory over the regime.

Learning from past oversights, campaigners are taking great care to build solidarity with minorities, human rights groups, trade unions, teachers, students, and the disadvantaged. Targeted outreach and dialogue are also underway with religious scholars. The Signatures Campaign has developed an innovative array of low-risk tactics employed to educate, communicate, and engage. These include internal capacity-building through training in urban and rural areas around the country, research and documentation, legal assistance, and general support for harassed members or women in prison, widespread dissemination of layperson educational materials on the oppression of women and its day-to-day consequences, blogging, a comprehensive informational website, street plays, and face-to-face interactions.

The latter tactic is an altogether different approach from street protests. Direct contact between campaign members and

ordinary citizens has been designed to promote awareness, set in motion a communication and feedback loop with the citizenry, and aid recruitment. Trained advocates speak directly with people wherever it is safe and possible, from buses, hair salons, and clinics to cafes, door-to-door home visits, and public celebrations. Their educational discussions do not break any laws, nor is it illegal to sign a petition. Finally, the campaign has adopted distinctive symbols, slogans, and songs that add a compelling new dimension to the campaign's messaging and communication strategy.

The Iranian government may have shut down civic space, but it is impossible to eliminate the public space—the site of everyday social and economic interactions. The Signatures Campaign is cleverly claiming the public space as its own arena of action. This innovative approach offers a vital lesson for civic

efforts, and independent in order to have credibility, build alliances, and enlist mass participation. The international community should take its cues from those within the movement and offer support as it is needed. The Signatures Campaign, for example, asks for non-political solidarity; attention from human rights and women's rights organizations; and publicity and advocacy regarding arrests and repression. It does not wish to receive support from government groups or quasi-government groups that "are closely linked with or are traditionally viewed as hostile to the Iranian government."<sup>22</sup>

Now into its second year, how has the Signatures Campaign fared? First and foremost, it survives and is growing—a feat in itself. Over 100,000 people have signed the petition, and nearly 1,000 individuals have been trained in face-to-

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## Under conditions of repression, citizen dissent can create space to operate in the public domain.

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movements around the world: it is not necessary to have civic space in order to organize. Under conditions of repression, citizen dissent and imaginative, low-risk civic actions can create space to operate in the public domain.

Finally, the Signatures Campaign has adopted a successful policy of transparency and autonomy. "Strictly confined to constructive social and legal changes," the Campaign's website states that it "avoids ideology from within and without."<sup>24</sup> The women leaders understand that nonviolent movements need to be homegrown, connected to grass-roots

face education and canvassing. The campaign is officially active in over fifteen provinces. Shirin Ebadi, the Peace Prize winner, recently said in a local workshop, "I should let you know that the demands of the campaign have penetrated deeply the various layers of society."<sup>23</sup>

**Prospects.** Not surprisingly, Iranian authorities are using multiple methods to clamp down on the women, a perverse indicator that the campaign is having an impact. Public meeting spaces are denied to them while private meetings in homes are broken up and homeowners are called in for interro-

