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## **The Islamic Republic's war on women**

***The election of Hassan Rouhani gave new momentum to Iran's devout Muslim feminists — but the mullahs aren't having it.***

By Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Foreign Policy (29.08.2016) - <http://atfp.co/2cjfXj8> - The phone calls started about six weeks ago. Men who didn't introduce themselves, working for Iran's security agencies, rang the country's most prominent women's rights activists and demanded they show up for interrogations. All the activists were told the same thing: "Don't tell anyone we've called you here. Don't speak to the media, don't breathe a word to anyone." But word seeped out, first in Tehran's feminist circles and then among political activists, who traded accounts of interrogations and lines of questioning.

The Iranian government's crackdown on feminists, one of the Islamic Republic's periodic intimidation campaigns against women's rights activists, is still underway. But the present iteration isn't just a push-and-pull struggle between the government and civil society, or between the censors and the country's most prominent women's magazine — it's a proxy battle between the president and the country's hard-liners.

Iran's women's rights activists, both religious and secular, seized the space offered by President Hassan Rouhani's 2013 election to emerge from the underground and engage again in public life. The Revolutionary Guards and the clerical establishment have responded by charging a vast international "feminist conspiracy" to undermine the Islamic Republic, funded by wealthy Western donors, intellectually articulated by feminist academics based abroad, and conducted by foot soldiers inside Iran — and even inside the president's cabinet.

Iran's hard-line clerical and military authorities have always been wary of women's gender activism, whether by secular "feminists" or religious "gender justice" advocates. They seem especially incensed, however, by Iran's homegrown Islamic feminists, who work for gender equality from a faith-based perspective, arguing from progressive readings of the Quran and fiqh, or the Islamic legal tradition, for greater participation in the labor force and better legal safeguards. This "egalitarian Islam" poses a special threat to hard-liners, because it challenges, from within the Islamic tradition, their conservative interpretation of the sacred texts in which they have invested so much since the revolution.

That's why hard-liners took special note of Rouhani's appointment of Shahindokht Molaverdi, for whom "egalitarian Islam" has been an intellectual bedrock, as his deputy minister for women's affairs. Trained as a lawyer, the devout Molaverdi was active in the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005, helping expand Iran's network of women's NGOs. She spent the stifling Mahmoud Ahmadinejad years working in civil society. Her views were progressive, but her determination to work within Iran's political system made her highly diplomatic. She always stopped short, for example, of

explicitly calling herself a feminist. When she was asked during a U.N. meeting in New York why Iran had not yet joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), her answer was nuanced. She said there were certain factions in Iran, as in the United States, strongly opposed to it and suggested there were other ways her government would enhance women's human rights.

Since taking office, Molaverdi's religious leanings have given her a degree of protection that secular feminists lack altogether, but she has confronted hard-line attacks all the same. Conservative news sites objected to her appointment, and hard-liners in the clerical and military establishments accused her of undermining Islamic values by encouraging women to work. They took issue with her collaboration with women's activists, her stance on the 2009 election, and even her master's thesis on violence against women. For the hard-line establishment, she was a clear threat: too grassroots, too effective, too connected. It even rankled that she had managed to become the first woman in Iran to secure a license to run a notary office, the privilege of clerics since the early 20th century.

The conservative establishment's anxiety has also been fueled by Molaverdi's successes in office. Her aim of encouraging women's participation in politics resulted in what hard-liners have called the "gendering" of the last parliamentary election, in February. Last October, a coalition of female activists, with Molaverdi's encouragement, announced at a press meeting the launch of the "Campaign to Change the Masculine Face of Parliament" by inviting more women to stand for election. Iranian reformists had their own separate meetings, demanding, among other things, a 30 percent quota for women. This revival of civil society paid off. Moderates affiliated with Rouhani swept Tehran, taking all 30 of its parliamentary seats, and, of these new legislators, eight were women. Across the country, there was a fourfold rise in the number of female candidates running for the latest Parliament, which led to doubling the number of female deputies.

That election, and Molaverdi's association with it, rankled Iran's hard-liners. They have responded by training their anger on a magazine run by one of her allies, the legendary publisher Shahla Sherkat.

Zanan-e Emrooz is a relaunch of Zanan, a publication that, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, brought women's issues into Iran's national conversation by convening religious and secular women's activists. It ran stories about everything from nose jobs to domestic violence, making the case that gender equality was entirely Islamic. It was a sort of religiously tinged Ms. magazine, an extraordinary publication unlike anything published in the Middle East. And it wasn't just a forum for activists like Molaverdi — it made women's legal and political rights the concern of ordinary women across the country. At least until then-President Ahmadinejad shut it down in 2008, accusing the magazine of "blackening" the country and spreading pessimism.

Zanan-e Emrooz was launched in 2014 in the hopeful wake of Rouhani's election. The first edition featured a group of smiling female veterinarians on the cover with the headline, "We Are Happy With This Choice," leaving it intentionally ambiguous whether that was referring to the veterinarians being content with their career choice, or the women's movement being happy with Rouhani. In her editorial announcing the magazine's rebirth, Sherkat wrote that once again it feels as if there is hope, and that after years of silence, journalists like her think they can have a voice. "We know they'll push back against us, but we have no choice," she wrote. Its cheeky October issue of that year, about the rise of "white marriage," otherwise known as couples just living together, prompted a temporary closure, but it soon resumed its predecessor's signature style of high and low feminist conversation.

February's issue would prove a fateful turning point. It featured an interview with the Iranian-Canadian academic Homa Hoodfar, a highly regarded anthropologist based in Montreal. The interview focused on her latest academic book, *Electoral Politics: Making Quotas Work for Women*, which discussed research on women and elections conducted in various countries and fueled the lively Iranian debate about quotas for women in Parliament.

It was not a debate that hard-liners were inclined to have. Hoodfar traveled to Iran last December and returned to Canada, telling friends that the mood was hopeful and that she was optimistic about progress under Rouhani. But after she returned to Iran in February during the parliamentary election cycle, authorities raided her flat the day before her intended departure. Agents confiscated her passports, laptop, and mobile phone. A string of interrogations culminated in her detention on June 6. A month later, Tehran's prosecutor announced that she, along with three other Iranian dual nationals, had been charged but did not specify the grounds.

Not long after Hoodfar's arrest, articles began trickling out on websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. Hoodfar, one piece claimed, was a foreign agent. Another published a day later featured an elaborate infographic showing the purported financial links between funding bodies in the West and the organs of the "feminist conspiracy" they supported. They alleged that her research was part of a sprawling conspiracy, an international network that with the aid of foreign funding has been seeking to infiltrate Iranian society and government. Not long thereafter, the regime began using Hoodfar and her foreign connections to tarnish influential figures in the Tehran women's movement. Many of them have received the ominous phone calls ordering them in for questioning.

The connect-the-dots of intrigue eventually lead to the Rouhani government itself. Hard-liners angrily cite his administration's attempts to suspend Ahmadinejad-era gender policies, such as a ban on women's studying certain subjects in universities, a reduction in their permissible work hours, and a stricter dress code. The hard-liners claim the Rouhani administration's efforts are nurtured and led by a conspiratorial network with Molaverdi at its center. Articles on conservative websites affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards enumerate her dangerous intentions and actions. Molaverdi's aim of enabling women to participate more widely in the economy, her sustainable employment initiatives, "are in line with feminists who want to push women out of the family, into society, straying from the right path." By "making a model of political women as successful," she is said to be distorting the honorable, traditional image of the country's rural women. (No mention is made that Iran has been an urban-majority country since 1979.) An excessive focus on domestic violence, rape, and the violence against women perpetrated by the Islamic State is "disturbing the public mind," the news site claimed. Ultimately, Molaverdi is seeking to "change women's lifestyle through changing laws and fine-tuning and reducing the religious, traditional aspects of Islam."

Perhaps most far-fetched, in the conspiracy theory spun by hard-liners, is that the diaspora-based feminists are the brains — and funds — behind homegrown feminism in Iran. If there is one major fracture in the world of Iranian feminism, both domestically and in the diaspora, it is between mainstream women's rights activists, who are prepared to work with Islam either out of faith or out of political expediency, and those who are openly hostile to Islam and project an Ayaan Hirsi Ali-esque revulsion for faith. The progression of some women's rights activists to this extreme anti-religious position reflects their despair at years of intense repression in the name of Islam. For years the state only tolerated the activism of religious women and targeted secularists with special violence; with the crackdown on the Green Movement in 2009, state aggression grew so severe that some of them abandoned the middle ground entirely.

The notion that anti-Islam diaspora feminists could be deeply involved in a plot with academics like Hoodfar, who has been the focus of their criticism for what they see as “pro-Islamic views and scholarship,” is inconceivable. These dissident feminists, who have long severed real ties with the mainstream women’s movement inside the country, are the sort of figures the Iranian regime wishes to hold up as representative of feminism: intentionally disrespectful to religious sensibilities and cosily enmeshed with donor institutions. Their inclusion, women’s activists say, is aimed at blackening the credibility of Molaverdi and others by association.

The last issue of Zanan-e-Emrooz appeared in June. In July, a post appeared on its website announcing that it would not be published again until further notice; the closure was “due to some problems,” but no other reasons were given. Sherkat was among those summoned for regular questioning after Hoodfar’s arrest.

Rouhani’s government, for its part, has made little headway with progressive gender policies, and Molaverdi and her supporters are mostly focused on re-establishing themselves as part of the national conversation. The tough work of correcting Ahmadinejad-era legislation remains. But even given the modesty of their aims, hard-liners seem determined to squelch their re-emergence. The persecution of innocent figures like Hoodfar looks increasingly like part of a concerted plan by hard-liners to undermine the chances of Rouhani’s re-election next year. For now, Rouhani’s government has remained quiet about the stealthy harassment of female activists, but as the 2017 presidential election nears, he will need to say something to convince Iran’s women that he is still on their side.