

What is There to Celebrate?

Shahrzad Arshadi, zanekoly@yahoo.ca

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11 February 2009 will mark the 30th anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution!

I cannot believe it has already been 30 years! Only thinking about these 30 years makes me cry. My heart is aching!

There are nights I wish that when I opened my eyes in the morning, I could take a deep breath and say to myself, whoa, what a nightmare! Unfortunately, what happened to Iran is a horrible reality! I am not dreaming!

I was not sure if I wanted to write anything related to the 30th anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution. A couple of days ago, I was surfing on the Internet to read news about Iran and to learn what is new in my country of birth. To make a long story short, I saw that the Government of Iran is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the revolution for twelve days, from February 1st to the 12th.

Thus, I decided to write something about it to remind myself about the reality of these past 30 years. I must try to clarify what the Iranian government is really celebrating! What history did they create in the past 3 decades, which makes them so proud that they must celebrate for 12 days?

Allow me to go back to the beginning of the revolution, or maybe a little bit before.

It was 1978. The Iranian revolution was in full swing. I was a teenager full of life and passionate about a big change, like so many young people during that period. We were all ready to get rid of the monarchy and bring justice and equality to our country. The future was so bright and it was right in front of us; we could be free from the hands of a dictator!

Finally the time had come: 1979 was glorious. The Shah left the country! However, the glory of the 1979 revolution did not last long for many Iranians. Women were the first to be targeted by the new regime.

- On 3 March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that women were not allowed to be judges.
 - On 6 March 1979, Khomeini announced that women should wear the "hijab" (the veil) in the workplace.
 - On 8 March 1979, international women's day turned into a protest against Khomeini's announcements -- this was the start of Hezbollah's attacks on demonstrations.
 - On 29 March 1979, Khomeini announced that beaches and sporting events would be segregated by sex.
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Women with no hijab were under constant attack on the streets and in public places. There were cases where acid was thrown on the bodies and faces of these unveiled women on the streets. Finally in June of 1980, with Khomeini's "Enqelab-e Edari" or "Administrative Revolution", the "hijab" became mandatory for Iranian women regardless of their religious beliefs.

Right from the beginning, Iran's Islamic regime started celebrating its power by executing people from every range of the old regime. But the killings did not end there. The new government started arresting everyone who did not want to be governed by religious fanatics.

Iran's prisons were flooded with political prisoners of every age, gender, religion and ideology. I will never forget the morning news from those early revolutionary times. Every day, the news started with a list of the opposition members who had been executed the day or the night before. Thousands had been killed in prisons all around Iran. Imagine your day when it starts with such morning news! Things changed for us drastically. We had been betrayed.

The Islamic government had no respect for any ethnic or religious minorities, most particularly members of the Baha'i faith. Right from the beginning of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Baha'is were reviled for their beliefs. In the Islamic Republic's new constitution, passed in 1979, Baha'is had been denied any rights as citizens of Iran. A good Muslim could attack and kill a Baha'i with complete impunity. From mid-1978 to 1979, a great number of Baha'is were attacked and killed by mobs. In 1980, at least 24 Baha'is were killed -- half of them were members of Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies. In the past 3 decades, 207 Baha'is have been killed; thousand have been imprisoned and tortured.

Since the Islamic regime has been in power, Baha'is have been prevented from obtaining higher education -- this discrimination is still going on.

On 19 August 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini declared Holy War against the Kurdish people of Iran. After Khomeini's order, armed forces attacked Kurdistan in order to destroy the Kurdish people's democratic and popular movement. Thousands were killed. Many young men and women moved to the mountains to organize a struggle against the Islamic government's armed forces.

In June of 1980, universities were shut down. The Islamic Cultural Revolution was on its way. According to the new government, since opposition to the Islamic regime dominated higher education and academia and because they are influenced by non-Islamic thought, university's systems must be changed completely. The Cultural Revolution forcefully took over university campuses. Students and professors tried to resist the Islamic Cultural Revolution control; many were injured, arrested and killed. Universities were closed for almost three years. After reopening in September of 1982, many books were banned. Many students were denied access to education and many faculty members were denied access to academic sites in universities.

1980 to 1983 was when elimination of opposition groups occurred. According to Amnesty International reports, more than 6000 were executed in Iran between 1979 and 1983. However, imprisonment and execution did not end in 1983. In 1988, thousands of political prisoners were brutally murdered by the Iranian government (estimates range from 8,000 to 14,000 executions). In

the summer of 1988, the massacre started right after Ayatollah Khomeini's "Fatwa" [i.e. religious ruling]: execution of all political prisoners, those whom the Islamic Republic of Iran called "moharebs" (meaning those who war against God) and "mortads" (apostates from Islam).

The 1980's were a decade of execution of members of the opposition and of war! The government executed thousands of political prisoners of every age, gender, and ideology. They never provided any information about how all these prisoners were killed; also they never acknowledged these executions. Khavaran on the south east side of Tehran is one of the cemeteries that have been used as a mass grave for the bodies of political prisoners executed in 1988. Even though many families do not know where their daughters, sons, husbands, wives, mothers or fathers are buried, in the past 20 years Khavaran has become a place for thousands of families to get together to grieve for their great loss. However, the Islamic government cannot even let the dead rest in peace, as they are doing everything in their power to destroy this mass grave. During the past month, in the winter of 2009, the Iranian government dug up Khavaran's mass grave in order to remove the remainder of the bodies to an unknown place. They have changed the soil and planted trees! They hope that maybe with the destruction of Khavaran, the blood from their hands will be washed away.

As I am looking at what I have written until now, through almost two and half pages, almost twelve hundred words, I cannot find a single word or reason to make me believe that this revolution deserves a celebration.

Through three decades of violence, abuse, discrimination, torture and execution, Iran has lived and still continues to live in fear!

Art was another victim of the new government. According to the new government, only art related to the Islamic Revolution was worth creating. Music was forbidden unless it was a tool for Islamic propaganda. Almost all the popular singers in Islamic Iran had no right to sing, because their music supposedly promoted western and non-Islamic values, from which only the devil could benefit. Hundreds of thousands of music albums and films were confiscated from radio and TV stations. Studio productions and even private collections in people's houses were not safe. Women's voices became the property of the Islamic government according to their belief that no man should hear women singing! Women were completely banned from being singers, unless they sang in a chorus with men.

The new reality was even harsher for dance! Dance had been forbidden for men and women. All dance schools were shutdown. No one was allowed to dance in Iran during those years!

The spread of fear and the killing of Iranian dissidents was not only inside Iran's borders. The Iranian government secretly orchestrated a "Committee for Special Operations" outside Iran. Several Iranian dissidents have been killed in Europe and Asia.

- Shahrokh Misaghi, a member of the student opposition, was killed in Manila, The Philippines, on 14 January 1982.
 - On 8 June 1982, Shahram Mirani, a Kurdish Iranian student and a member of the student opposition to the Islamic government, was attacked on the streets of Aligarh-India at night, and beaten to death.
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- On 10 September 1982, Abdol Amir Rahdar, a member of the student opposition to the Islamic government, was killed in Bangalore, India.
- In 1990, Kazem Rajavi was killed in Switzerland.
- In 1991, Shahpur Bakhtiar, the last Prime Minister under the Shah, was found with his throat slit at his house in France.
- On 9 August 1992, Fereydoun Farrokhzad, a famous Iranian singer and poet, an outspoken artist who spoke against the human rights abuses of the Iranian Islamic government, was stabbed to death and beheaded with a knife at his home in Bonn, Germany.
- On 17 September 1992, Iranian Kurdish dissidents and opposition leaders Sadegh Shahafkandi, Fattah Abdoli, and Homayoun Ardala were assassinated at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin, Germany. The killers were arrested but set free and sent to Iran after a while. The German federal prosecutors during the trial directly accused Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani for ordering and approving the killings.

The list goes on!

The 1998 serial murders of Iranian dissident intellectuals were a series of murders and disappearances of Iranians who had been critical of the Islamic Republic. Among them were Mohammad Mokhtari, a great Iranian philosopher and poet, Mohammad Jafar Poyandeh, a philosopher and translator, Ms Parvaneh Eskandari, Dariush Forouhar, Majid Sharif and.... No one ever gave any answers about these crimes.

The 1990's were the beginning of independent student rallies against the government and against university policies.

On 9 July 1999, police and hard-line vigilantes attacked a dormitory at the University of Tehran. One student was killed and twenty were injured by the attackers. Not long after that, the Government of Iran banned street protests. Many students were arrested and tortured for the simple gesture of asking for better treatment for students.

Hundreds of newspapers and magazines were shut down and banned from ever being published again. Many Internet sites and blogs were disrupted and their creators arrested.

In spring of 2003, university student's rallies hit the streets of Tehran and other big cities. It was during that time when *Ziba Zahra Kazemi*, an Iranian – Canadian photojournalist, happened to be in Tehran. On 23 June 2003, she had been arrested in front of Evin Prison while she was taking photographs of the demonstrations. She was tortured and murdered while she was in the custody of the Iranian government.

These recent years are not different from past years. Farzad Kamangar, a 33 year old Iranian Kurdish teacher and trade unionist, was sentenced to death by the Iranian Revolutionary Court on the 25 February 2008 after a trial which took place in secret and lasted only minutes. His execution could take place at any moment. Many Kurdish activists have been arrested and killed during the past few years.

On 15 May 2008, six Baha'i leaders in Iran were arrested and taken to the notorious Evin prison. They are still in jail without having gone through a trial.

On December of 2008, Islamic authorities shut down the Centre for Defenders of Human Rights led by Shirin Ebadi, and raided her private office, seizing her computers and files. Furthermore, on 1 January 2009, pro-regime "demonstrators" attacked Ebadi's home and office.

On 15 January 2009, at least six Baha'is were arrested, including a woman who worked at the Centre for Defenders of Human Rights and who was connected with Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi. The six were arrested after government security agents raided the homes of 11 Baha'is. They also confiscated Baha'i books and other items, such as computers and photographs.

The list of human rights abuses in Iran is longer than anyone can imagine. On 12 June 2006, a peaceful demonstration organized by women activists to demand changes to discriminatory laws against women turned violent, no thanks to Islamic government officials and supporters. Seventy women were arrested during that demonstration in Tehran. A great majority of these women were not looking for a big change or to overthrow the government, as they had emphasized in a "Million Signature Campaign". These women specified that the demands of their campaign were not in contradiction to Islamic principles. They were looking for a change in the current system. Regardless, even a simple demand for change to the discriminatory laws -- by only collecting signatures -- is a big threat to this totalitarian government.

On 15 October 2008, the Iranian Ministry of Information arrested Esha Momeni, an Iranian-American student at California State University/Northridge. She went back to Iran to make a documentary about women's rights activists, but to this day she is trapped in Iran, because officials have confiscated her passport and have forbidden her to leave the country.

Alieh Eghdamdoust was transferred to Evin prison on 31 January 2009, to serve a three-year prison term in relation to her participation in the peaceful protest of 12 June 2006.

Nafiseh Azad was arrested while collecting signatures in support of the Million Signature Campaign on 30 January 2009. She is now under interrogation at Vozara Detention Center. On 3 February 2009, security officials from the Special Security Branch of the Office of the Prosecutor of the Revolutionary Courts stormed the home of imprisoned activist Nafiseh Azad and seized her personal property as well as the property of her housemates.

This is what the Islamic Republic of Iran is celebrating!

I understand there is so much more that I have to add to this text, but let's stop here. However, this is a brief version of these events! This is only a part of what the Iranian people have been through since the Islamic government came to power!

For that reason, let us not forget what happened to Iran in the past three decades! Let us remember the thousands and thousands who lost their lives over the past three decades! Let us remember those who are in prison because of their beliefs! Let us remember those who are being stoned to death because they make love outside the Islamic framework and laws! Let us remember those who live under constant abuse because of their sexual orientation! Let us remember...! Let us remember in order to prevent the same thing from happening again!

We need to narrate what happened to us. We need to remind ourselves that oppressors may be able to confiscate many things from us, but they can never confiscate our hopes and dreams.

Two weeks ago, I participated in a demonstration to support the people of Gaza. The slogan that was mostly repeated by participants was; “*Silent accomplice!*”

I think it was for the same reason that the great Martin Luther King Jr. said: “*Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.*”
