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Iran's Resilient Civil Society

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE FIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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Given the limits on freedom of research and the prevalence of terror and intimidation within Iran, it is small wonder that so much Western commentary on the country is framed by the propaganda purposes of a totalitarian regime. Yet Iran watchers can and should do better. Instead of letting themselves be distracted by the Islamic Republic’s opaque and tightly controlled elections, for instance, observers should take fuller note of the continuing ferment and activism within an Iranian civil society that is now more than ever thoroughly alienated from the regime—a ferment and an activism that the Islamic Republic itself is certainly noting and indeed frantically trying to repress with lies and violence, freely and often publicly applied.

The 2005 election of hard-line Islamist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency of the Islamic Republic surprised more than a few Iran watchers. Many read his win as a sign that Iranian civil society had sunk into lassitude after a failed push for political reform that had neglected to reckon with the truly salient issue, which was not democratic freedom but popular economic demands. As Vali Nasr put it in these pages, “The intraregime reformists behind [outgoing president Mohammad] Khatami focused too closely on the cultural and political demands of the middle class . . . and neglected the socioeconomic demands of the poor—an omission that would come to haunt the reform movement in 2005.”¹

Some commentators depict a society that has become apolitical and apathetic.² The implication is that the window of opportunity for democratic reforms has closed, and that the international community should focus instead on the Iranian government’s pursuit of nuclear capabil-

ity. As a result, diplomats from the European Union—with U.S. support—took the issues of human rights and liberalization off the agenda in their dealings with the Iranian government in favor of concerns about the nuclear program and regional-security matters.

Yet events that have taken place since the 2005 presidential election belie the false image of Iranians as no longer interested in claiming the rights to liberty and self-government that the Islamic Republic systematically denies them. Numerous reports from Iran tell of brutal official efforts to crush forces for civil rights that are in fact displaying considerable dynamism (otherwise, the regime would hardly need to apply such relentless repression).

Although space permits the mention of only a few, examples of protests and crackdowns are not hard to find. On 12 June 2005, five days before the first round of presidential balloting, several thousand women's rights activists sat in at Tehran University's main entrance to demand the abrogation of laws that discriminate against women. Massed security forces violently broke up the peaceful gathering. Undeterred, the activists returned exactly one year later only to be assaulted again by security agents. Yet the movement for fairer treatment of women continues to grow.³

Since Ahmedinejad's election, three important provinces have seen mass demonstrations and severe repression. Ethnic-Arab Iranians in oil-rich Khuzestan took to the streets between September 2005 and January 2006 to protest economic deprivation and ethnic discrimination, demanding the release from prison of activists for Iranian-Arab cultural rights. The regime reportedly killed seven people in putting down these peaceful demonstrations. Thirteen more were put to death, after a one-day trial, on charges of having taken part in bombings in the province.⁴ Massive protests and rioting rocked Iranian Kurdistan in August 2005 following the July 6 murder by security forces in Mahabad of the young Kurdish activist Shivan Qaderi. Photographs of his mutilated corpse—regime agents had dragged him behind a car—were widely seen on the Internet, sparking demonstrations across the province to demand the murderers' arrest and trial. The government met the protests with live ammunition, killing at least seventeen people and detaining several prominent Kurdish journalists and activists.

Less than a year later, it was the turn of Azerbaijan Province in the northwest. On 12 May 2006, a cartoon in a state-owned newspaper offended many ethnic-Azeri Iranians. Small student protests in Tehran and Tabriz (the provincial capital) spread rapidly, and on May 22 the latter city was the site of a huge rally. The following days saw the action move to other towns. By the time it was over, authorities had used beatings and lethal gunfire to disperse the crowds.

Activism has not been limited to matters of gender and ethnic rights. Since Ahmedinejad's election, workers and teachers have claimed the

right to found independent unions and call strikes, which they have done on numerous occasions.⁵ From 6 to 8 March 2007, thousands of teachers rallied in Tehran and the provinces for a pay raise, declaring a general strike. The regime's response was violence and mass arrests.

Journalists and bloggers are regularly harassed and arrested, and newspapers are closed for publishing writings deemed unorthodox or subversive.⁶ A welter of unorganized, disparate, and individual acts of civil disobedience goes on as well. Some commentators dismiss these as apolitical, but they are actions that the Islamic Republic takes seriously enough to spill blood. Such actions—they often involve the young—include violating the regime's strict dress code, listening to loud music, partying, and drinking. The latest morality crackdown began in April 2007. As of June 2007, hundreds of thousands of people had received warnings, more than 20,000 had been arrested and conditionally released, and 2,265 cases had been referred for trial.⁷

In addition to ethnic, economic, political, labor, and youthful rebels against the regime's controls, there are spiritual protestors as well. Strong displays of religious dissent have come from people who have turned to Shi'ite ayatollahs who reject the regime's politicized version of Islam, to alternative forms of Muslim spirituality such as Sufism, or even to other religions altogether such as Christianity. Cases of religious repression have been notable during the last two years.⁸

All these individual and group protests have taken place while the regime has been using signal brutality to deter expressions of discontent. In such circumstances, one can reasonably surmise that for every public dissenter there are many more who hold similar views but keep quiet out of fear.

Why Election Results Tell So Little

The evident inaccuracy of those commentators who paint Iranian society as somnolent since the last national elections points to a major flaw in their analysis of Iranian politics. This flaw goes back to at least the early 1990s, when elections in the Islamic Republic stopped sporting Stalin-style 90 percent or more majorities, and too many Western experts responded by seizing upon ballot returns as the main indicator of attitudes and intentions within Iranian civil society at large. This was and is a grave mistake, for elections do not play the same role in Iran that the casting of ballots plays in liberal democracies. In the latter, voting actualizes the individual's autonomy in the political realm. In the Islamic Republic, voting does not—and is not meant to—accomplish any such thing.

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder, sought from the outset as a matter of principle to suppress the individual's right to self-determination as the source of political legitimacy. To this

end, he also sought to transmute the very ritual of voting. Even though he could easily have won a democratic mandate from the people, Khomeini deliberately refused to seek one. He had no intention of submitting what he considered his divine mandate to a popular vote, and never did so. He did call a referendum to determine Iran's political regime, but in the event Iranians were asked to vote for a regime whose content had not been publicly revealed. In April 1979, Iranians voted for an Islamic republic without knowing what it was. By doing so, they were unwittingly blessing their own disqualification, since simply turning out for such a vote meant tacitly agreeing with the idea that a self-proclaimed providential leader knew better than they did what was good for them.⁹

The referendum turned out to be a political masterstroke against liberal democracy. Instead of rejecting the electoral principle as a liberal-democratic (and hence putatively blasphemous) institution, the Islamist-revolutionary leadership cunningly adopted a twisted version of it. Voting itself was used to seal the denial of the people's sovereignty. The Islamic Republic's constitution, which came into force in December 1979, reduces elections to nothing more than a cog in the machinery of cooptation. Voters choose, but only among candidates whom the ruling oligarchy has extensively screened and preselected. The constitution treats election results as a mere expression of "public opinion." The most effective role that voters can play is to help the ruling factions settle matters when they cannot agree on a single candidate. That is why there is never a guarantee that the official results reflect the actual votes; if one faction is stronger there is nothing to stop it from massively cheating, as happened during the election that raised Ahmedinejad to the presidency.¹⁰

On a deeper level, Iran's theocracy has chosen to institutionalize elections because it conceives of them as enactments of a primordial ritual through which the intangible truth manifests itself in the political realm. The regime's ideologues describe voting as a process through which the "thoughtful masses," after "having evaluated what God has revealed to them," then act to "acknowledge it . . . confess its legitimacy . . . and commit themselves to it."¹¹

The symbolic role of elections in the Islamic Republic explains why no one should look to them for signs of real trends within civil society. Voting in Iran is a ritualized show in which the names on the ballot are irrelevant, since they do not signify a free choice. What the regime wants and needs is merely for people to flock to the ballot boxes in a nationwide photo opportunity. What they do once they get there has been controlled for in advance, and their very presence means that they are acceding to the regime's claim to divine legitimacy.

Not surprisingly, selected foreign journalists are welcomed to cover the elections, but no independent international monitoring is ever permitted. The official turnout figure never falls below 60 percent. The public

never has access to independently verifiable numbers, while the government always has the means—and often a strong motive—to falsify them.

Why State Violence Tells So Much

If elections offer no window on the aspirations of the Iranian people, then what might? Polling and statistical studies are not permitted, and even if they were, the climate of intimidation means that few would speak their minds. One obvious and indeed information-rich indicator is the long-term pattern of violence that the Islamic Republic inflicts on Iranian society. International human rights NGOs regularly report on state violence and abuses of human rights, and political scientists and analysts often acknowledge the dire oppression that goes on in the polities they study. But these students of politics do so as moral individuals, not as scientists or scholars: They seldom integrate the substance of these reports into their studies, and their humanly decent acknowledgements have little impact on their analyses. Yet in many an authoritarian, totalitarian, or posttotalitarian regime, violence is the main axis of interaction between the state and society. Moreover, the target zones at which the regime aims its truncheons, secret police, thugs, and assassins are almost by definition the very spaces where civil society's drive toward autonomy is struggling to emerge and hence become available for study.

Thus the monitoring and documenting of human rights abuses are not only moral and humanitarian necessities, but epistemological imperatives. That which the regime fears constitutes an important type of scientific data. A series of such data, collected and analyzed over time, can reveal patterns of development in the array of social forces that might or might not lead to democratization.

Therefore, some consideration of at least recent history will be in order. Although an exhaustive inventory of the violence wreaked by the Islamic Republic would fill volumes, there are key events whose significance merits consideration. In retrospect, some may even come to appear as turning points where one political era ended while a new one began. A series of murders that state-security agents committed in the last months of 1998 may stand as one such tragic and bloody link between the past and the future of Iran.

The news hit like a shock wave on the afternoon of Sunday, 22 November 1998. Dariush Forouhar, a former labor minister in the postrevolutionary provisional government, and his wife Parveneh Eskandari had been found stabbed to death in their home after having been visited by agents of the Information Ministry the night before.¹² This vicious crime against a pair of elderly and peaceful nationalist dissidents was meant to terrorize at a time when the recent election of Mohammad Khatami as president had seemed as if it might herald an era of opening in Iranian life. Yet the crime roused not so much fear as unprecedented public outrage. The couple's funeral became a

mass demonstration against violence and for freedom of expression, the first such display since the early days of the revolution that toppled the shah.

The Forouhars had been open and unimpeachably nonviolent dissidents who stood alone as living links to overthrown premier Mohammad Mossadeq (r. 1951–53, d. 1967).¹³ After Khatami's election, the couple had begun hosting small gatherings of students eager to revive the Mossadeq-style secular-nationalist tradition that their parents had dismissed in 1979. The Forouhars' historic credentials had made them dangerous. On November 24, another victim joined them when next of kin identified the slain corpse of Majid Sharif, a journalist and translator known for advocating the separation of religious from political authority. Information Ministry agents had questioned him several times.

Although they appeared novel, these murders actually belonged to a chain of slaughters that stretched back more than a decade to July 1988, when Khomeini had created three-man commissions to reinterrogate his regime's political prisoners (mostly religious or secular leftists). Over a six-month period, these commissions questioned thousands of prisoners, most of whom had already been tried and convicted, in order to discover the nature and strength of their religious and political views. The commissions did not inform prisoners that the state considered these sessions to be retrials which could lead to execution. Those deemed "unrepentant" were put to death on the spot. All was done in secret; to this day the regime has still not accounted for all the detainees who disappeared.¹⁴

From July 1988 to November 1998, state agents murdered most of the leaders, notables, or prominent sympathizers of the Iranian opposition both inside and outside Iran.¹⁵ With the Iran-Iraq War over and the Soviet bloc disintegrating, the Islamic Republic calculated that it was time to write itself an insurance policy in blood. All the activists and leaders whom the Republic's rulers feared might start reorganizing amid new international circumstances less favorable to the regime were marked for death. Through their political itineraries, actions, and lives, those who died were linked in one way or another to the historic episodes that had marked Iran's emergence as a modern nation-state since the Revolution of 1906. It is true that many had not been democrats, but the most prominent among them had learned from the past and were adopting democratic values. More importantly, they had the irreplaceable capital of trust and determination that takes decades to build up, is intertwined with important historical events, and is the stuff of leadership. Hence Iran's rising generation—the children of the 1979 Revolution—was left on its own, an orphan of history searching alone for identity, dignity, and freedom.

The Death Bus and the Birth of a Civil Rights Movement

The regime's blood revels of late 1998, dark and awful as they were, nonetheless aroused a reaction that hinted at the flickering genesis of a

new and better type of politics. But the darkness was no metaphor. On December 3 and 9, respectively, with the public still reeling from the slaughter of the Forouhars, the writers Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Jafar Poyandeh were each found strangled.

The cascade of cadavers spurred reformist newspapers to begin investigating the crimes. It soon became clear that for a decade the government had been extrajudicially killing prominent members of Iran's intellectual elite and silencing their friends and relatives with threats and intimidation. Public outrage was such that victims' families felt encouraged to speak out and ask about their loved ones. Dissidents and investigative journalists suggested that up to eighty extrajudicial killings had taken place inside Iran, while more than a hundred dissidents had been assassinated abroad.

Hardly any of the writers and intellectuals targeted for death had ties to any opposition group or were even politically active. The regime killed them out of fear of a type of subversion other than the political kind. The stranglings of Mokhtari and Poyandeh suggested that the lifted human voice—freedom of expression, in other words—was the target of this “second front” in the regime’s terror war against its own people. Through the prism of the 1998 serial killings, one can glimpse the rise of a new form of dissent, focused not on overthrowing the Islamic Republic out of ideological motives, but rather on defending the civil rights of all.

The first stirrings might be said to have begun with the 13 March 1994 arrest of the renowned author and social critic Ali-Akbar Saidi-Sirjani on a raft of trumped-up charges. In 1988 and 1989, he had published a pair of works on classical literature that bore long introductions full of metaphoric but unmistakeable criticisms of clerical rule. The books swiftly became best-sellers, and Sirjani soon found all his works banned. In response, he wrote letters to officials in which he objected to government censorship. This was a new challenge for the Islamic Republic. Sirjani was not a fomenter of coups or armed rebellions, but a peaceful writer offering a principled public defense of freedom of expression for everyone.¹⁶

His arrest and the vilification hurled at him by the official media stirred more than sixty of his fellow authors to send a letter of protest to the head of the judiciary. The letter’s initiators were summoned to the Information Ministry and advised to retract it. In the meantime, a tortured Sirjani was paraded on television confessing to his alleged crimes. The pressure and the intimidation to which the writers had been subjected prompted them to reconstitute the Iranian Writers’ Association. To explain their actions, they wrote a manifesto that has become famous in Iran as the “Declaration of 134” (for the number of its signatories). The writers claimed it as their “natural, social and civil right” to “reach the public in a free and unhampered manner,” and embraced as their

“principal goal” the “removal of all obstacles on the road to freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of publication.”¹⁷

The Declaration of 134 was published on 12 November 1994. Its authors sent copies to the Iranian authorities as well as to PEN International and writers’ associations around the world. Fifteen days later, the government announced that Sirjani had “died” in custody. Undeterred by this and other warning rumbles from the police state, the writers continued to meet and discuss the revival of the Writers’ Association. The government then hatched a surreal plot. Officials sought to lure leading writers on a bus trip to a 7 August 1996 cultural event (staged for the purpose) in Armenia. During the ride, the driver (an intelligence agent) was to drive the bus into a mountain gorge. Some writers were suspicious and refused to go. Happily, the plot to kill Iran’s brightest literary lights in a fiery bus crash was thwarted when three writers, alerted by the driver’s strange behavior, watched him closely and managed to right the vehicle after he aimed it at a precipice and leapt out.¹⁸ Although intelligence officials warned those who had been on the bus to keep quiet, the writers decided to challenge the government. Once back in Tehran, they adopted a September 1996 draft charter based on the principles of the Declaration. The government’s response was the 1998 murder spree.

Why did the Islamic Republic strike in such an extreme way at a small, not very political coterie of intellectuals? The reason was the powerholders’ fear of “cultural invasion.” The authors of the Declaration of 134 had resolved—against the grain of their own intellectual heritage—to base their new association purely on the individual’s natural right to freedom of thought and expression. They deliberately made no mention of any legal context, pointedly ignoring the constitution of the Islamic Republic. They pledged to defend members’ rights without regard to the content of their work, their opinions, or their political leanings. They were trying to give social power and form to a universally valid right that humans should have by nature, above and beyond political and historical circumstances. Without confronting the state and its ideology directly, they were trying to endow themselves with an independent social identity. One could see in their tragic effort the early signs of civil society’s drive toward emancipation from the grip of a totalitarian regime and its holistic claim to dominate the entirety of human life.

The importance of the writers’ initiative and the state’s bizarre backlash against it became clearer when one considers the historical background against which these events took place. The 1979 revolution that had swept the shah out and the Islamists in had had little to do with ideas of civil society and human rights. But now, a decade and a half later, these concepts—so crucial to the advance of democracy around the world—were making their influence felt in Iran and promising (or

threatening) to supplant the classic revolutionary and nationalist ideas. And while the regime was desperately trying to stop its opponents from promoting civil society, a new front in favor of civil society was opening within the regime's own ranks, as a reaction against its own violence.

Universities Under Attack, 1999–2003

The 1998 serial killings occurred at a time when part of the ruling elite was promoting an opening—albeit an odd one, still in thrall to state ideology—in the name of “Islamic” civil society. Whatever its peculiarities, however, this opening attested to the influence of reformist discourse in focusing the higher expectations of youth upon the regime. President Khatami could pepper his seemingly liberal speeches with all the subtle reservations and nuances he liked; what the kids who had campaigned and voted for him in such huge numbers were hearing was talk of change. Among the younger generation of radical Islamist revolutionaries were some with leftist leanings who, having fought Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to a bloody standoff, came home from the war only to see a handful of clerics and their cronies grabbing all the money and power for themselves. The collapse of the Soviet bloc added to these young veterans’ doubts about revolutionary orthodoxy. Under the influence of writings by Eastern Europe’s anticommunist dissidents, some Iranian intellectuals began amid this climate of disillusionment a slow conversion to liberal ideas. These former radicals became the intellectual force behind the reform movement and allied themselves with students and young people generally.

Facing unprecedented public anger in the wake of the 1998 murders, the regime began a damage-control operation. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei belatedly and ambiguously condemned the killings while Khatami promised an investigation. This was limited to the cases of the Forouhars, Mokhtari, and Poyandeh while the government continued to pretend that the whole scheme had been the work merely of supposed “rogue elements” within the Information Ministry. The radical reformist newspaper *Salam* blew the lid off this cover story by independently looking into the murder campaign and finding links between the killers and high-ranking officials—reportage that brought about the paper’s swift closure.

When students peacefully rallied in early July 1999 to protest the *Salam* shutdown, the regime’s thugs attacked college dormitories. Residents were beaten, stabbed, and thrown out of windows. An unknown number were killed; many more were injured or saw their property destroyed. The ensuing street demonstrations and five days of rioting in Tehran and at other universities around the country led to a massive wave of arrests among students and leading dissidents. The regime’s brutality during the 18 Tir (July 9) episode shocked its young witnesses and

victims, many of whom were proregime students too young to recall the violence of the early 1980s. In their innocence, they had expected their “reformist” government to bring the serial killers of dissidents to justice, uphold press freedom, and support their own right to protest. They had no inkling of the historic pattern of state violence that they were up against. They gave the government four more years and patiently called for the support of reformist members of the ruling elite during the 2000 legislative and 2001 presidential elections. Meanwhile, the regime went on banning newspapers and arresting students as Khatami equivocated, “rogue” agents received lenient treatment, and detained students gave coerced confessions regarding crimes that they had not committed.¹⁹

The students were learning a hard lesson in political science and philosophy. As they surveyed the wreckage of reformist hopes and struggled to make sense of their ordeal, they realized that they were facing evils inextricably rooted in the regime’s totalitarian ideology and consequently defective constitution. The break between the student movement and the reformist wing of the ruling elite became final in 2003 when the Islamic Student Associations (ISAs), for the first time since their creation in the early 1980s, called for an electoral boycott.²⁰ Founded by the regime for its own purposes, the ISAs had decided to strike out on their own as civil society organizations dedicated to defending the human rights of students and citizens generally.

In May and June 2003, students renewed protests against their conditions and on behalf of their detained comrades. The urban populations began joining in, producing the biggest popular uprising in the history of the Islamic Republic and shaking the regime to its foundations. Within weeks, security forces had arrested more than four-thousand people, about eight-hundred of whom were students.

The Islamic Republic’s state-terror campaign of 1988–99 not only alienated a number of middle-ranking cadres but also—in another first—an entire institution that had been founded as a prop of the regime. This was the Office for Consolidating Unity (OCU), as the ISAs’ nationwide umbrella group was known. Originally set up to terrorize and silence students in the early 1980s, the OCU had two decades of repression later become a force for human rights and justice under law. In November 2004, three well-known OCU representatives joined an imprisoned attorney for the 1998 victims, an exiled women’s rights lawyer, and a religious nationalist in calling for an internationally supervised referendum on a new constitution in keeping with the UN Declaration on Human Rights.²¹ Posted online, their appeal had by October 2005 (more recent figures are hard to come by) gained 36,000 signatures, many from Iranians abroad.

It is worth noting that prison, torture, and exile had failed to stop the authors of the referendum appeal. The effect on political conversation was striking. Groups that had never had much to do with one another

before were engaging in debate and discussion. As Ahmedinejad was taking office, the Islamic Republic was losing the children of the revolution to a new and modern civil rights movement.

Prospects Facing Iran's Civil Rights Movement

In the two decades since the Iran-Iraq War ended, the Iranian political landscape has been transformed. With most of its historic leaders killed, the traditional political opposition found itself reduced to a few circles of aging fellow travelers. To the regime's satisfaction, they failed to capitalize on the referendum campaign. Their internal disputes even led to the closure of the referendum website, which was the only place where signatures could be collected. Yet the failure of such traditional actors has contributed to the heightening of civil society's political awareness and the rise of various forms of civil rights activism among students, workers, and others. The government's use of terror and violence has failed to stop these developments. The core of the new movement consists of people between the ages of 25 and 45. They are truly a postrevolutionary generation; most were children or not even born as of 1979. Their numbers are enormous given Iran's vast "youth bulge." They lack their parents' predilections for Islamism, nationalism, or radical leftism; their commitments are to human rights and nonviolence, with not much ideological baggage beyond that. They feel connected to the world through media such as the Internet, and this bolsters their advocacy of civil rights.

Recent efforts to create independent teachers' and transport-workers' unions are encouraging. Unions had often been sites for power struggles between the state (first monarchist, then Islamist) and pro-Soviet factions. Those two forces crushed bids to form independent unions in the wake of the Second World War. Later, the Islamic Republic would adopt the Soviet mode of governance and spread state-run "Islamic" unions and associations throughout the country. Today, these unions are struggling to respond to the challenge posed by the teachers and the Tehran bus drivers, who base their labor activism on the universal right to freedom of association.

Student unions, too, have taken up defending civil rights and strengthening the culture of democracy. They struggle to protect their independence as well as freedom of expression on campus. Facing a wave of harsh repression in 2003, they wrote to the UN secretary-general and keyed each of their complaints to an article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²² This gesture symbolized their claim to rights as free individuals with standing before an international community framed by the Declaration.

The women's rights movement is the most interesting and innovative wing of the push for civil rights in Iran today. At first, those who aspired

to improve the dire lot of Iranian women became lawyers and journalists and started magazines. But as the proregime reformists failed to deliver, women's advocates followed much the same path as students, setting up small NGOs dedicated to helping individual women with their troubles, giving them legal aid, and promoting awareness of their problems. Faced with heightened repression and barred from holding meetings and demonstrations, they devised a new grassroots movement against gender discrimination known as the One-Million Signatures Campaign.

Since 54 activists launched this drive in August 2006, it has become one of the regime's toughest challengers—in part because its demands appeal to the female relatives of the ruling elite. Indeed, the women's-equality campaign has blurred the clear lines that used to divide insiders from outsiders in the Islamic Republic. The campaigners have published a booklet entitled *The Impact of Laws on Women's Lives*. With it in hand, the movement's more than five-hundred active members²³ approach ordinary people in the streets, at work, or at home, and explain the petition before asking them to sign it. The campaign's website, *we-change.org*, has become a lively forum for debate, discussion, and campaigners' reports on their encounters with the people whom they approach as well as with the security forces.

Like the writers, the women's advocates are not so much directly defying the Islamic Republic as simply ignoring and working around it. They define their actions and goals in a way that goes above and beyond the Republic, its history, and its laws.²⁴ Their campaign is the continuation of a struggle for female emancipation that reform-minded Iranians of both sexes began in the late nineteenth century. The loose structure allows for flexible growth, including the involvement of young men who believe that women should share in the promise of liberty. Students have been supportive, and Kurdish sympathizers have launched a website called *kurdsforchange.com*.

On the minority-rights front, too, fresh developments are stirring. A new generation of Iranian-Kurdish activists has risen to reject the armed struggle that has long been their parents' main form of dissent. In April 2005, a group of these younger activists founded the Kurdistan Human Rights Organization (KHRO) to promote human and minority rights in the Kurdish region as well as Iran in general. Strikingly, the KHRO's reports refuse to ignore or excuse the misdeeds of the Kurdish opposition, which receives its share of blame for rights abuses. This is another heartening sign that a principled culture of concern for civil rights is gathering strength in Iran, and also that civil society NGOs are capable of true independence.

There are many smaller campaigns involving individuals closer to the ruling elite. Such initiatives include the remarkable work of lawyers who campaign against stoning, for instance, or against the execution of children. Scholars and translators have been doing their bit quietly to

promote democratic culture by producing Persian-language editions of democratic (or protodemocratic) and antitotalitarian classics by such authors as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Cesare Beccaria, Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas.

On the individual level, and often at great personal risk, many Iranians are even asserting their right to freedom of conscience by opting for different forms of spirituality both within and outside of Islam. Groups dedicated to monitoring the persecution of Christians report a substantial rise in the number of Iranians converting to Christianity. The state, typically, betokened its worry in late 2005 by assassinating yet another church leader and arresting and intimidating many Christians.²⁵

A Promising but Vulnerable Movement

For all its vitality and innovative character, the nonviolent civil society movement remains extremely vulnerable. Since the election of Ahmadinejad, whose main goals are to restore ideological orthodoxy and suppress all signs of civil society's independence, individuals involved in carrying out the 1988 prison massacres and the 1998 serial killings have been rewarded with high government posts.²⁶ The intensity of the state's judicial and extrajudicial violence has increased alarmingly.²⁷ The moratorium on stoning—declared by the government under international pressure—has several times been violated. Arbitrary detention, harassment, banning of students from universities, heavy fines, and flogging are now the daily lot of too many Iranian civil rights activists. To make matters worse, the judiciary has recently sentenced two young Kurdish journalists to death.

Iranian civil rights advocates have tried to protect themselves by opting for collegial leadership as a way of keeping their movements from depending too much on the survival of a single person or a handful of people. The women's rights movement, for example, has tried to structure itself so that it has only members and no leader. Its members avoid direct confrontations with despotism. They simply relay facts created by the unfairness of existing laws, and report on the situations faced by victims of discrimination. While the state strives to deny them their rights as Iranian citizens, these activists carry on with their work under their "second identity" as international human rights advocates. As the state tries to isolate them and make them see themselves as irrelevant, this second identity becomes ever stronger as outreach to other NGOs both within Iran and internationally continues apace.

Not surprisingly, the regime is now targeting precisely such networking efforts and the building of the alternative identities that help Iranian dissidents to surmount the sense of isolation that leads to despair and apathy. In a move to isolate the civil rights movement, the government in July 2007 aimed a campaign of denigration at women's rights and

student NGOs. The low point in this festival of lies and slander was the televising of staged, coerced confessions by three apolitical scholars, each a dual citizen, whom the regime had arrested. Such “confessions,” of course, are state-prepared scripts meant to implicate students and women’s rights activists in fanciful plots to overthrow the Islamic Republic with the help of U.S. and Israeli intelligence agents, acting by means of international conferences and civil society NGOs such as the Open Society Institute.

By painting international human rights NGOs as tools of foreign governments, the Islamic Republic is seeking to cut off Iranian dissidents from the outside world, even as the Republic’s rulers and their friends funnel money and arms to their own foreign allies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and groups in Iraq. Iranian dissidents have shown signal resourcefulness, courage, and perseverance. But they are peaceful warriors in a cage with a tiger; they will need the support of their own society as well as strong backing from the international community.

Democratic states should not let themselves be intimidated by the Tehran regime’s rhetoric and propaganda warfare. The dire human rights situation in the Islamic Republic should never be ignored. Democratic states should use their leverage to halt the regime when it approaches a crescendo of repression. Students in democratic countries should take up the cases of their detained Iranian fellow students. Trade unionists should continue to press for the release of their Iranian counterparts. Journalists and human rights advocates around the world should urge their governments to act on their behalf to obtain the voiding of death sentences issued against peaceful journalists. An incessant campaign of shaming and blaming should go on, strengthened by international diplomatic pressure. As instances such as the stoning suspension show, the regime can be made to respond to international public pressure. The key is to apply it consistently, energetically, and without being diverted by the regime’s ploys.

The birth of a civil rights movement in Iran is a ray of hope in a region beset by difficulties, and the most promising response to the new totalitarian threat that is endangering the world’s stability. Democratic governments around the world should realize that supporting this movement not only is the right thing to do, but is an urgent national-security imperative for themselves and their peoples.

NOTES

1. Vali Nasr, “Iran’s Peculiar Election: The Conservative Wave Rolls On,” *Journal of Democracy* 16 (October 2005): 10.

2. See, for example, “Iran: What Does Ahmadinejad’s Victory Mean?” ICG Middle East Briefing 18, 4 August 2005, 5.

3. See Iran's Women's Rights Advocates, "Democracy Cannot Be Achieved Without Liberty and Equal and Human Rights for Women," 12 June 2005. Available at www.abfir-iran.org/english/document-207-421.php.

4. At the time of his alleged crime, one of the convicted men was serving a 35-year sentence for "insurgency against the state." See Human Rights Watch, "Iran: End Executions After Unfair Trials," 15 February 2007.

5. On 25 December 2005, three-thousand workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company walked off the job to protest the Intelligence Ministry's arrest of fourteen trade unionists, including their leader, Mansour Osanlou. Protest actions and strikes have continued intermittently since then.

6. See the 2007 annual report of Reporters Without Borders at www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=20758&valider=ok.

7. These figures were reported by police official Hossein Zolfaghari on 25 June 2007. See Niusha Boghrati's 7 August 2007 report for Radio Farda at www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/08/19a93c39-5851-4229-925a-e1c5840923a5.html.

8. In early 2006, the regime launched its largest-ever clampdown on mystical Sufi schools, whose nonliteralist view of Islam is drawing the young. New stirrings among the traditional Shi'ite quietists—who reject the regime's key doctrine of the supremacy of the lone Islamic legal expert—also have authorities worried. On 30 June 2006, the Shi'ite cleric Sayed Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi, an advocate of the separation of religion from politics, spoke to a stadium-sized gathering of his followers. On October 6, a police attempt to arrest Boroujerdi at his home set off a two-month siege and the biggest outbreak of religious dissent against Khomeinism since 1979.

9. "The Islamic Republic is a doctrinal republic . . . it is different from a democratic republic. We cannot allow the popular suffrage to be in command without any restrictions; this is incompatible with the constitution and with an ideological regime." M. Beheshti, *Minutes of the Debates of the Assembly of Experts*, 1 September 1979 (21/06/1358), 1:376.

10. Official figures claim that Ahmadinejad won 5.7 million votes in the first round and 17.2 million in the runoff. How did he gather an additional 11.5 million votes in one week? Even if turnout was steady across rounds, and if Ahmadinejad received all the votes that went to the two other hard-line candidates in the first round, that would only give him an additional 5.8 million votes. If in fact, as the regime admits, second-round turnout was actually lower, how could Ahmadinejad have almost tripled his vote total? Bill Sami'i, "Iran: Do The Presidential Vote Numbers Really Add Up?" Radio Liberty, 30 June 2005.

11. This quote is from Khomeini student and leading regime theoretician Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli, *Piramun-e Vah'y va Rahbari* (On revelation and leadership) (Tehran: n.p., 1989), 171–79. Translation by Ladan Boroumand.

12. Parastou Forouhar, "Report to the Nation," November 2002 (in Persian). Hanny Megally, director of the Middle East and North Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, discussed the case in an open letter to Khatami on 25 November 1998.

13. See Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division's Executive Director, Hanny Megally's *An Open Letter to Iranian President*, 25 November 1998.

14. No one knows the exact number killed by this judicial-murder campaign within the prisons of the Islamic Republic. Between July 1988 and January 1989, Amnesty International recorded the names of some 1,700 political prisoners who had been murdered. See Amnesty International, "Iran: Over 900 Executions Announced in Five Months," newsletter, 19 June 1989. Iranian sources have published the names of more than three-thousand victims of these bloody assizes.

15. The Islamic Republic's hit men killed dissidents and opponents in Austria, Cyprus, Dubai, France, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Pakistan, Switzerland, and Turkey. Iranian Kurds lost two leaders. Former premier Shapour Bakhtiar and a high-ranking member of his organization were stabbed to death in Paris in April and August 1991, respectively. Many small leftist groups' leaders were also targeted.

16. Sarvenaz Bahar, "Guardians of Thought: Limits on Freedom of Expression in Iran," Human Rights Watch report, 1 August 1993. Available at www.abfiran.org/english/document-88-513.php.

17. The quotes are from the English-language text of the Declaration of 134, which is available at www.iranian.com/news/dec98/declaration.html.

18. Hushang Golshiri, "Dinner at Gust's House, Trip to Armenia and Meetings with Hashemi," *Payame Emruz*, September–October 1999, 31. See also M. Noghreh Kar, "The Light That Will Never Go Out," at <http://iiae.org/adabiyat/Noghrehkar%20masoud/tarikhe%20kanoon.htm> (in Persian). Both Golshiri and Kar are among the original signatories of the Declaration of 134.

19. See student leader Ali Afshari's open letter to the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Shahrudi, 17 August 2005. Available at www.abfiran.org/english/document-242-502.php.

20. See the Islamic Association of Sharif University of Technology, "Ballots Bring the Honeymoon of Reforms to an End," 7 March 2003 (www.abfiran.org/english/document-199-402.php).

21. The appeal for a referendum is available at www.abfiran.org/english/document-213-438.php.

22. The letter is available at www.abfiran.org/english/document-87-404.php.

23. See www.we-change.org/spip.php?article533.

24. See www.we-change.org/spip.php?article618.

25. On 22 November 2005, police arrested Pastor Ghorban Dordi Tourani, a convert from Sunni Islam to Christianity, at his home. A few hours later, he was found stabbed to death. Raids on Christian homes followed the attack. The number of such homes—they form the base for a "house-church" movement—appears to be significant and growing. See www.christiantoday.com/article/christianity.spreading.in.iran.via.multimedia/11248.htm.

26. Human Rights Watch, "Minister of Murder: Iran's New Security Cabinet," 1 December 2005.

27. According to research by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, the 26 months from Ahmedinejad's election in June 2005 to 23 August 2007 have seen the Islamic Republic legally execute 555 people and extrajudicially kill 415 more. In addition, 210 people have died in what are usually reported as "clashes" with security forces. Since Iranian officials do not announce all executions, it is almost certain that the real number of deaths is higher.