“The Women’s Rights Movement and Feminism in Post-Islamist Iran”

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Political Islam or Islamism, understood as the deployment of Islam for the political project of establishing an Islamic state, came to the forefront as an increasingly global trend since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. Islamism has been transforming and evolving through its confrontation with the challenging alternative discourses of human rights, women’s rights, and democracy as well as economic and cultural exigencies of the 21st century. But, one theme has remained central to Islamism’s unity despite its diversity, and that is its preoccupation with holding control over women, especially women’s appearance and apparel in the public. The Islamist Hijab—both on the heads of its advocates and in the minds of its non-Islamist Muslims and non-Muslim Western observers, has been viewed as the most salient marker of not only an identity, but also of political power over a national territory or an ethnic community.

In more recent years, however, even this cardinal feature of Islamism has become subject to transformation thanks to feminist interventions. Such creative—if not subversive—interventions have been most noticeable and effective in the birthplace of Islamism as a state power, i.e., the Islamic Republic of Iran. In their daily lives and daily actions, through their persistent presence in public spaces, many urban middle class educated women in Iran, especially members of the younger generation, have deconstructed, or reconstructed, reshaped and redefined the meanings, parameters and functions of hijab. Through various forms and tactics of resistance, Iranian women’s rights advocates have transgressed the state-imposed sex segregation and achieved some visible changes in the patriarchal purpose and parameters of hijab in particular and other mechanisms of male domination in general. This has included a continuous non-organized and “non-movement” (Bayat, 1997) daily resistance of a sort of “cat and mouse game” with the authorities on the streets on the one hand, and some more deliberate semi-organized campaigns, debates, dialogue, and discursive negotiations on the other. This latter loosely organized strategy has included occasional street demonstrations that usually end with the police attacks, many arrests, and persecutions.

The achieved changes may symbolically manifest themselves in the shifts in women’s dress-codes and appearance in public. For instance, the most visible is the shift from the all-encompassing black and slippery chador that was officially declared as the ‘superior hijab’ (hejab-e bartar) by the ruling clerics in the 1980s (entailing the least mobility and practicality) to some more practical and mobile versions of ‘mantua-scarf’ ranging from neutral colors of completely covered hair with no show of body curves to very colorful, fashionized loose scarfs showing lots of hair and tight tonics and layers of cosmetics. Less symbolic changes include impressive rise in the literacy rates and even outnumbering the male student enrolment in the universities (63 percent female since 2000); drastic decline in fertility rates (from 6.5 to 1.5); women’s participation in sports, film-production and cinema directory; writing best-selling novels or short stories with feminist themes; feminist press (print as well as on-line such as weblogging; music and singing; massive turn out in the national elections and some success in running for the public offices; impressive campaigns against discriminatory laws, especially patriarchal family law; campaign to outlaw stoning; challenging the patriarchal interpretation of religion and the sharia rule; changes in the patterns of marriage, sexuality and sexual relationships (inside and outside marriage and beyond the dominant heterosexual norms);
demanding the ratification of CEDAW, hence a call for profound reforms in the Islamist constitution. Such efforts on women’s part and some minor fulfilment of their demands are remarkable not because women in Iran have achieved drastic and ahead of the time progresses, but mainly because they have been able to prevent further regression. Actually, some of the positive changes have been ironic and unexpected to happen under the ongoing patriarchal legal and traditional barriers, the sexist public education, the sexist media representation, and the sexist and repressive state persecution of women’s rights activists and any forms of feminist ideas.

In this paper, I will argue that the women’s resistance and agency on daily basis, and especially the women’s rights movement in its semi-organized network format along with its well-framed feminist discourse has been a key agent of change toward a shift in Iran’s political culture, resulting in a “post-Islamist” era in Iran. Borrowed from Asef Bayat (2011), the notion of ‘post-Islamism’ is “defined both as a condition and a project characterized by the fusion of religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. Post-Islamism emphasizes rights rather than merely obligation, plurality instead of singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scriptures, and the future instead of the past.” It represents “a critical break from and an alternative to ‘Islamist politics’. It “promises to make Islam compatible with democracy.” (Bayat, 2013: xi)

Through an overview on the trajectory of over 100 years of women’s rights movement in Iran, I will analyze the fertilizing impact of the women’s movement in Iran’s move to post-Islamism, specifically on the pro-democracy Green Protests of 2009-2011. The non-violent, non-ideological, non-hierarchical, and polycentric networking and diffused nature of the women’s movement; the significance of its glocal and trans-national dimensions; and the facilitating role of the social media, were some of the historically new features in Iran’s social movements during the 1990s and 2000s. Many of these features were later adopted by the Green Protestors as well. One of the primary victims of the brutal suppression of the Green Movement under Ahmadinejad has been the women’s movement as it lost its momentum and prominence right after the emergence of the Green Movement and its subsequent suppression. It remains to be seen if the moderate rhetoric of the new conservative government of Hassan Rouhani proves to bring about any tangible improvements in the state of women/human rights in Iran and thereby a relative opening for women’s activism.

I will end the paper by briefly addressing some of the theoretical questions and practical challenges that the Iranian women’s rights activists (inside and outside Iran) are facing now with regard to their aspiration to re-strategize, re-organize, and re-mobilize their movement and move beyond the present semi-abeyance state.