

I love to fight

By Fatima Bhutto

In a far away place, Hillary Clinton announced her intention to run for president in 2008. She sat on CNN and in her American twang highlighted the problems of the Bush Administration. "Obviously (awb-veeously) they have failed in every possible (pah-sihbel) way: We have to reign in Iran and Syria and it has to be done now." Oh please. This from a country where a woman has never made it to the vice presidency, let alone the presidency? If you ask me, it's the Americans that need to be reigned in and liberated — Operation Enduring Freedom should be launched stateside.

Iranian women have not only successfully survived the Islamic conditions imposed on them since the Revolution, they have thrived under them. What women have accomplished under the Revolution has secured them a place in the reinvention of the Republic, and a prominent place at that. Under the Shah's time Iran had an illiteracy rate of 65-70 per cent; now there is a 70-80 per cent literacy rate.

Goli Emami, a translator, writer and publisher, put it to me this way, "During the Shah's time, we had certain freedoms but we had a Hijab over our eyes. After the Revolution, we still had a Hijab but we were able to push it back over our heads". Khanum Emami's continued: "The Shah's freedoms for women had no roots, no base — they did not genuinely come from women's hearts, like it does now. Because we had to prove ourselves, we have become so capable. Women here are such a force you wouldn't believe it."

I told her how amazed I was with the resilience of young people in Tehran; Iranians under the age of 30 make up 70 per cent of the population. Their will to dominate and persevere is so strong it pulses through the streets and avenues of the city. Khanum Emami agreed with me. "Where did this generation come from? We wouldn't have dreamt of confronting the state and the rules imposed on us they way they do, the youth are constantly in a confrontational mode — they are truly the children of this Revolution, who taught them how to battle the state."

Khanum Emami's publishing house includes translations from Nietzsche, books on civil society in the Islamic world and the collected works of Emily Bronte.

Haleh Anvari's photography centres on the most potent political icon of our times: the black chador. It is used by the West to define Islam in a repressive and suffocating light and by the East as a symbol of their radicalism and total religious belief. Anvari's Chador-nama series brings colour back to the imagination — both Eastern and Western — of Iran. Women in bright floral chadors pose near the fading light of a forest, between the imposing peaks of mountains and walk on pebbled desert roads. Anvari wanted to, needed to, colour the black that defines women in Iran. "The Islamic Revolution made women such a powerful symbol of change — visually. Iranian women are aware of how the politics of the Islamic regime affects them and there's a portion of feminist intellectuals, who believe that the Hijab is a small price for them to pay if it brings other sisters out of their homes."

Fifty thousand art students are graduating out of Iranian universities every year, a large portion of them being women. Anvari described Iran as a country stuck between pride and fear — pride that they, surrounded by a sea of stooges in the region, are an independent country — albeit with pronounced pariah status — and fear that things could get worse and that Iran might soon pay the price for its intense politics of disobedience.

I must stress that none of these women are believers in Islamic rule, nor are they especially fond of the current regime. They do not wear chadors and they do not want politics to be inscribed on their bodies or their minds. They are strong, courageous, women and it is that and the virtue of their talent that defines and shapes them. Daily life is a struggle, Anvari said, but "our minds are freer than citizens of many Western democracies". "We have a question mark about everything, but after 9/11 it seems that people in England, for example, believe every single lie that their politicians tell them. We are more critical. More engaged."

Shadi Ghadirian is another prominent photographer, whose Qajar series set in the sepia tones of the past empire, placed women in olden day portrait settings, holding Coke cans and boom boxes. Twelve years ago when she shopped her work around in galleries, there was not a single space that would exhibit her photographs — women's faces were forbidden from being seen. Not a single space dared to show the work, except for one. Lili Golestan's Golestan Gallery took on Ghadirian's photographs and displayed them proudly. Why did you do it? I asked her. "I am not afraid of them, they are afraid of me," she replied defiantly.

No, women are not afraid in Iran. Nayere Tavakoli, a professor of women's literature at the Islamic Open University in Tehran, is one of the few academics working in a brave new discipline: Women's Studies. The field is only about five years old in the country, but Tavakoli teaches Virginia Woolf and Erica Jong and works to improve understandings of gender identity and discrimination. She teaches classic and modern Iranian feminist writers and is active in several political feminist campaigns. She showed me a petition that demands the eradication of anti-women laws, laws that deprive women of the right of custody, laws that put the price of blood money for a women at half the price given to men, archaic inheritance laws — basically the Hudood Ordinance, but in a prettier language. Tavakoli and other women activists are lobbying for a million signatures — and they don't want foreigners' signatures to bolster numbers, no, they'll do this on their own and for themselves.

Mahvash Sheik ol Islami's latest documentary film, Article 61, followed women on death row in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. She fought for six months to gain access to the women, all convicted of murder in self-defence, and filmed for five days straight eating and working in the prison with the inmates. "Every time I walked out of the prison gates I thought — I'm free. They're not. Why?" Because of her film and the awareness it raised locally and internationally, Khanum Mahvash saved the lives of two women. One woman, who stabbed and then castrated an officer, who tried to rape her in her home, was released from jail because of the furore with which the women's movement in Iran followed her case. Another woman's death sentence was commuted at the 11th hour because of the letters written by Khanum Mahvash to newspapers and officials. Her commanding film, though banned, could not be ignored.

"That's amazing," I whispered. Khanum Mahvash stood up to wear her coat, "I love to fight. As long as I'm alive, I have to fight".