

My kingdom for a centrifuge

By Fatima Bhutto

In the past week I have received many emails and comments about my Tehran diary. Do you work for the Iranian Foreign Ministry? Was a popular question. I don't. Why haven't you written about centrifuges and the nuclear programme? What about Ahmadinejad? What about disaster, impending doom, and political strife? Why is everything about Tehran so pleasant and 'fluffy'? Tehran is a city under siege, so why aren't we hearing about bomb shelters and anti radiation pills?

We want heavy! If they aren't in drab Mullah gear burning American flags and beating their women into the kitchen, then it doesn't make the papers. It's just not exciting enough.

Let me elevate the discourse for you: this is heavy. This is what you don't know, what the western and Pakistani media are not interested in telecasting about Iran. I went to write about the Iranian people, to write about resilience and the conflict on the ground. This is the city, raging with the pulse of millions of people that could be hit by the American military as soon as April of this year. Do you want heavy hitting? This is it: those women who brave persecution to express their art, the government health centers that provide, rather than deprive, their people of care, the millions of minorities fighting their way out of poverty and refugee camps to make a better life, your centrifuges even, they could all be gone. Tehran could be Baghdad in a matter of months. I expected to find a current of fear in the heart of the country, expected people to be expecting the very worst. But I was wrong, so were you - Tehran could never be Baghdad, could never be Kabul, because its people will prevent that from happening because they are born with an instinctive nature to fight; to resist.

There exists in the Iranian people a spirit that no people in the region can claim to possess. Are they still enriching uranium? Probably. Will they scale back on the nuclear programme? Never. What do they think of their president? Let me tell you this much, they like him as much as they like ours - and there is little affection for the General in Iran. President Ahmadinejad is seen as somewhat of an international president, not a domestic one. While he is lauded around the Muslim world as being a courageous leader who refuses to be bullied by American imperialism, he is seen as a weak and worrying President at home. Inflation is up 30%, unemployment is rising, and women fear that he may reverse the progress built under the Khatemi government. But here's the rub: Even with all this, there is nothing frightened about the Iranian people. They do not need stability to feel secure. Iran is a land of many contradictions, this seems to be their motto, but it is true. Though they struggle with restrictions imposed upon their freedoms at home, they are a fiercely independent people and will not be cowed under the threat of war, nuclear fission, or Hijabs.

I visited the office space of Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel peace prize laureate and human rights lawyer, while in Tehran and was amazed to see that there was no police squadron guarding her door. There were no Rangers deployed outside synagogues or churches. And the campus of Tehran University is populated by thousands of students seated on a foundation of resistance and activism. The gates of the campus open onto Enqelab street and that is extraordinarily powerful. They never shut the door to Enqelab.

I met a young man who told me that while he was in college his father was a senior member of the administration and dealt specifically with universities - monitoring student activism, the curriculum, the politics of the professors and so on. I joked that he must have had a great undergraduate experience - great grades and no deadlines - thanks to his connections. "No" he said "I was arrested twice actually". He wasn't arrested for partying or engaging in illegal vices; he was arrested for being part in the Iranian student protests in 1999, the most radical and violent protests since the Revolution in 1979. The student's cause? The closure of Reformist newspapers and the crackdown on freedom of thought and expression. Many young men and women were jailed, Ahmed Batebi a symbol of the brutal lockdown on the protests, remains in jail till this very day. That is Enqelab. That is Iran. These are the people who face the threat of war and who are at the heart of their country's political destiny. Do you still need centrifuges to understand Iran?

Women's salaries in the office are equal to men's, how many European countries can boast of that? There are 10 pre-natal clinics, in and around Tehran, set up by the government to ensure the rate of infant mortality and genetic diseases, such as hemophilia, stays low. Each center costs \$50,000 to set up.

The voting age, until the law is amended which some hope might happen, currently stands at 15. You can be a teenager and cast a ballot. Iran may not have a perfect democracy, there are certainly flaws in its definition of the system, but there are elections every four years for the presidency and there is an actively engaged youth waiting to take a stake in their politics.

This is the fluffy matter that concerns the Iranian citizenry; rest assured it is not the IEAE. It was politics through people that I, a media novice (not a superstar, as you will remember), went to explore. Tehran in that sense is abundantly wealthy. This has been a tract in defense of the Iranian people and their indomitable spirit. I hope I took you with me in the truest sense of the word. Thank you for reading.