

These are strange times

By Fatima Bhutto

Tehran is covered with political murals — there are the billboards and posters of the country's many martyrs and the faces of supreme leaders can be found staring down at you from most businesses and government buildings — but it is the art work that is the most politically and aesthetically striking.

On the Chamran highway there is a mint green mural of flowers and the Ayatollah's image. "Our folks are the man of martyrdom and heroism," it reads, a saying from the Ayatollah Khomeini. This is not unusual, in the bazaar you find stores protected by the Imam's words, warning against greed and reminding entrepreneurs of Islam's generosity and simple lifestyle. Next to billboards advertising mobile phones is a poster of a woman in a full chador, holding a baby in one hand and a Kalashnikov in the other. The baby is also holding a gun, a black toy model. The yellow writing under the poster reads something like this: Motherhood is good, but martyrdom is better. The woman and the baby are smiling away proudly. On the building of a local bank is a mural of Mohammad al Durra, his father shielding him with own body as the IDF fired bullets into a crowd of Palestinians, killing the young boy. There was a Hezbollah logo above the mural and a pizza parlour below it.

Perhaps the most fascinating murals are to be found on Taleghani Street on the walls of the former US embassy, heretofore officially referred to as the Den of Espionage. The gates of the compound are remarkably fortified, high walls and spikes protruding outwardly to stop intruders from jumping the wall. Yet somehow 28 years ago, 400 Revolutionary Guards stormed the US embassy and with the Ayatollah's blessings took 52 Americans hostage. For 444 days no one else made it past the embassy gates, nor did anyone else make it out. "Down with USA" written in Farsi and English cushions the main gates of the DoE.

After a conveniently placed bookstore selling tracts on the Revolution is a few hundred feet of political artwork named "The Portrayal of the Great Satan". There are portraits of soldiers walking into battle against Iraq while missiles with 'USA' stamped on them fall onto a map of Iran, silhouettes of Revolutionary protesters shouting the graffitied 'Down with the Shah', the Statue of Lady Liberty with a skull for a face, and most cross culturally — a tableau of Shamsy, traditional Iranian rectangular patterns, with a large pistol bearing the stars and stripes of the American flag superimposed on Iranian's fine art.

While anyone familiar with history, or indeed action movies, would find the DoE's preservation and cultural re-invention completely titillating, there are those in Tehran who simply couldn't care less. While one part of the society is confronted by politics and active engagement in the ongoing processes of the Revolution, the other is holding court at coffeehouses. It is not hard to spot this second stratum of people; there is a glassy eyed indifference to the city's elite (financial elite, not intellectual I should stress) that makes them highly obvious. "What do you think of Tehran?" asked one Canadian/Iranian expat in his early 30s. He didn't actually wait for me to answer, just stubbed out his cigarette and

swished around his cafe mocha and answered his own question "It sucks". I disagreed with him, his cellphone buzzing and chirping while I spoke, and he waved to several friends while I was robustly defending my opinions. "Yeah well, I guess you're from Pakistan, so it must be interesting for you," he replied to my poetic half speech, dripping with boredom as he spoke every word. I suppose I couldn't blame the expat for his tired reflection, he had been out partying the night before. And the night before that while on the streets of Tehran the month of Muharram is signalled by Taziyeh processions and the constant drumbeat of marching boys, reminding the citizens that Ashura has come.

I had heard stories of the Comiteh or religious police raiding homes and dragging young partygoers to jail and asked, against better judgment, the Tehranis on the table if they worried about being arrested. A woman with a bouffant hairdo and a headscarf to match her bag giggled and said it was no big deal; she once spent three days in jail after getting busted at a wedding party. "Three days?" it sounded a bit extreme and I wondered what she had been caught doing to deserve that much jail time. She giggled again "No, no, it was that long because it was the weekend and the offices were closed so my parents couldn't bail me out". It really wasn't a big deal, her parents sent her chocolate and fruit and though they were informed that their daughter was not in a hotel, but jail, managed to keep her comfortable until her release. She was arrested again a month later walking out of another wedding party.

Everyone agrees that Iran is a country of contradictions, sometimes absurd ones. A trendy fast food restaurant was set up a few years back called "MacMashallah". It was no McDonalds, but it was pretty popular. American imports are not welcomed into the country, but yet you could go out with friends and order a Mashallah burger while outside the eatery beggars cajoled people into parting with a few Tomans by swirling around Esfand, incense that wards off the evil eye, over their heads. At the Ghaem mall in Tarjish square fashionable Manteaus, or Islamic coats, with Gucci labels are sold on one floor while artists teach miniature painting classes, in the ancient Persian tradition, on another floor.

At a gallery showcasing avant-garde photography a young man asked me how I had spent my time in Tehran. I rattled off the names of journalists I had spoken with and feminists that had inspired and amazed me. He smiled proudly and told me how progressive his country was becoming. What have you seen? He asked, curious that I had seen all the important landmarks and universities that are the seat of Iran's historical activism. I mentioned in passing the shrine of a certain divine leader I had visited and he glazed over, moments after cheering me on. "Oh, I never went there," he yawned, "We call it the place of the Great..." He stopped and smiled, I knew what he was going to say next and I gasped. It seemed a brazen borrowing of language. "It's no big deal," he continued, "We say what we want here". In Iran language is continually rejected and then reappropriated, histories dismissed and then vigorously defended, ideologies voted for then abruptly abandoned. It is a country of schizophrenic identities and bipolar politics, and I mean this in the best way possible. Women hold high government positions but are warned that smoking in public might get them punished by the police. How do you navigate between these very thin lines? You don't, say most Iranians, rather you embrace both. "Hazard not a thought: these are strange times, my dear" wrote Ahmed Shamlu, the modernist poet jailed both under the Shah and the supreme leaders of the Revolution. Indeed they are.