

Iran's Hard Line Begins At Home

By Azadeh Moaveni | August 27, 2006



Islamist Iranian women demonstrate against loose veiling after the weekly Friday prayer in Tehran, on April 28, 2006.

When Behnaz Mohsenian, 29, started English lessons at Tehran's Najdad Institute this spring, the 15 men and women in her class studied grammar sitting in mixed circles. Last month the language school split the group by gender, with men and women meeting on different days. Now plans are under way to move the women's classes to a separate building, to eliminate altogether the possibility of illicit mingling. "It feels," says Mohsenian, "as if we're all incapable of behaving like normal people and need to be regulated at all times."

When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office last summer, everyone nervously watched to see whether Islamic dogma would shape domestic policy. To much delight, nothing changed: Western films were sold everywhere, women wore skimpy veils, and couples held hands in the street. But the long, libertine honeymoon is over. The hard line now seems to begin at home for the Ahmadinejad regime (which last week inaugurated a new reactor project, defying a U.N. demand to end its uranium-enrichment work by Aug. 31, and gave only a tepid response to the West's offer of incentives). Over the past few months, various branches of the government have stealthily rolled back freedoms with moves like the reinstatement of gender segregation in public institutions. Because the Iranian system comprises ministries with overlapping mandates and security apparatuses that operate independently, it's hard to say whether this is a government-wide crackdown or whether some officials are just feeling emboldened by Ahmadinejad's conservatism. Nonetheless, the tone is being set on high--and the impact is being felt throughout society.

The new hypermorality isn't exactly a return to the days of the Ayatullah Khomeini. Today the tactics are subtler

than in the past, when morality police were dispatched onto the streets of Tehran to harass youth. Instead, regular Iranians are being cowed into the role of enforcer.

A month ago, I met a few girlfriends for coffee at a popular café. One of my friends lit a cigarette and was informed by the embarrassed owner that smoking is now illegal for women in cafés. Such small but significant restrictions are a discouragement. Half the women I know don't go out for coffee anymore. So without a single police raid, the authorities have stifled Tehran's bustling café scene.

The restrictions are multiplying daily, with dress codes imposed on women's-clothing retailers and limits on women performing music in public. Last week trucks laden with satellite dishes rolled through my Tehran neighborhood; police have been confiscating the illegal devices all around town.

It isn't clear how long these strict measures will last. So far, the government seems undaunted by the lack of public enthusiasm for its causes. For instance, on the eve of the Lebanon cease-fire, it celebrated Hizballah's non-defeat as if it were an Iranian victory. It cooked what was billed as the world's largest kebab--more than 21-ft. long. And Iranians were "asked" via the state-run media to go up to their rooftops at an appointed hour and shout "Allahu akbar" (God is great). The tradition, from the early days of the Islamic Revolution, used to draw people out en masse. The city reverberated with their cries. Last week, across most of Tehran, one heard only silence.