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Hundreds of Women Protest Sex Discrimination in Iran

By NAZILA FATHI

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TEHRAN, June 12 - Hundreds of women staged an unauthorized demonstration in Tehran today, protesting sex discrimination under Iran's Islamic leadership just days before the June 17 presidential elections.

The protest was the first public display of dissent by women since the 1979 revolution, when the new regime enforced obligatory veiling. "We are women, we are the children of this land, but we have no rights," they chanted. More than 250 marched outside Tehran University, and about 200 others demonstrated two blocks away after hundreds of riot police swarmed in and barred them from joining the main protest.

There were reports that the police clubbed several women, though there were no hospital reports of injuries. Demonstrators said they saw some women being detained and dragged away by officers. But the situation appeared to stabilize, and after about an hour of demonstrating, the women disbanded without further incident.

"We will continue such protests because it shows that women are aware of their rights," said Roohi Afzal, 52, a translator who was at the protest. "It seems that our presence today really hurts the government, that it has

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deployed so many forces. Maybe it will react and respond to our demands."

The demonstrations were part of a recent push by women's rights advocates in Iran to draw attention to their cause during a time of relative tolerance by the government as it seeks to draw more voters to the polls.

Iranian women have turned out in great numbers in elections over the past two decades, often strongly supporting candidates who have promised more rights. But many advocates now say that they have given up hopes that any president could change their status under the current constitution. And women are signaling that they are tired of being courted with promises of improved status that are quickly forgotten once the election is over.

Some 89 women who had registered to run for president were rejected last month on the basis of their sex by the hard-line Guardian Council, dominated by six unelected clerics and six judges. The move was greeted with outrage, leading to at least one call for a boycott, though it was carefully worded.

"As long as half of the population is banned from being elected as president, we declare that the regime must not expect women's high turnout," one group announced in a statement last week.

Zahra Eshraghi, the granddaughter of the Islamic revolution's leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, said in an interview this week that working on women's issues has been very difficult because women did not feel safe to criticize the laws. "There are certain things that are considered as crimes although the situation is gradually changing," she said. "For example it would have been very dangerous to talk about changing the constitution, or women's right to choose their dress. There can be no progress if women don't feel they are safe to express their demands."

However, the more tolerant condition that has appeared temporarily before the election has allowed women to express their criticism like never before.

The mood was reflected in a meeting with a reformist candidate, Mostafa Moin, last week and another meeting this week.

At one of the meetings, Ms. Eshraghi said that candidates

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who promised to improve women's status must clarify how they could bring any changes as long as the country was ruled by Islamic law, or Shariah. Iranian law stipulates that the value of a woman's life and her testimony in court are half those of men. Iranian men can marry up to four wives and have the right to divorce any of them at will. A woman inherits half of the share her brothers receive and needs her husband's permission to work outside the home or to leave the country. Women are rarely promoted to high positions, and despite their relatively high levels of education, they make up only 14 percent of the government employees.

Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh, a feminist who was jailed last fall, said, "Women's rights will be fulfilled only when the constitution changes."

A group of women activists found the courage to force their way into the stadium to watch a soccer game between Iran and Bahrain on Wednesday for the first time since the Islamic Revolution banned women from watching games at the stadiums. For four hours, they carried signs that read, "My right is also human rights," and "Freedom, justice and gender equality."

"It wasn't that the security was not letting us into the stadium because of an order," said Parastoo Dokoohaki, one the women who was at the protest. "Every single one of them believed it was inappropriate for women to watch the game from up close."

Authorities were forced to allow the women in for the second half of the game after Ms. Abbasgholizadeh's leg was crushed under the gate.

Yet, candidates are aware of the role women can play in their election and have employed young, liberal women to campaign for them in a gesture that suggests they favor more freedom for women. Many of them work at the headquarters of leading presidential candidates, like Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Baqir Qalibaf, a former police chief.

One woman who introduced herself as Tahereh, 22, wore a narrow pink see-through material over her head and had a piercing in her nose. She said she received 300,000 Rials, \$33, per day to drive in her car around Tehran with Mr. Rafsanjani's poster on the rear window, though she is cynical about the result. "I do it for the money," she said. "He is responsible for the situation. Why would he change

it?"

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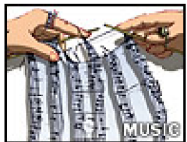
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