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Iran: Women's Activist Wins Human Rights Award

by Farangis Najibullah

PARVIN ARDALAN'S MOVEMENT HAS BECOME POPULAR WITH YOUNG WOMEN (KOSOOF.COM)**PARVIN ARDALAN, A LEADING IRANIAN WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST, HAS WON THE PALME AWARD FOR HER WORK AND COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHTS.**

Ardalan is a founder and active member of the One Million Signatures Campaign, a movement that aims to promote equal rights for women in Iranian society.

The prize is named for former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme and is awarded annually for "outstanding achievements" by those who actively promote peace, equality, and security.

Ardalan's friends say she has dedicated her adult life to fighting for women's issues. Ardalan was one of the first members of the Women's Cultural Center, the first-ever Iranian nongovernmental organization to advocate women's rights.

The 37-year-old, Tehran-based journalist and author has previously worked for women's publications such as "Zanestan" and "The Feminist Tribune of Iran" before both of those online magazines -- as well as "Women's Cultural Center" -- were shut down by Iranian authorities in 2007.

Ardalan, who is currently an editor of "Change for Equality," contributes to many publications in Iran -- including the most influential women's magazine, "Zanan," which was suspended last month for allegedly "painting a gloomy picture" of Iran.

In her writings, Ardalan focuses on women's issues and the challenges that Iranian women face in their everyday lives.

Ardalan became an active supporter of women's rights when the One Million Signatures Campaign was set up by Iranian feminists in August 2006.

The campaign members aim to change what they call "discriminatory laws against women," such as different inheritance and child custody rights for women and men as well as unequal rights after a divorce.

One Million Signatures

To realize these changes, Parvin and other members of the feminist movement have been trying to collect 1 million signatures from Iranians to urge the country's parliament to change the "discriminatory laws."

Ardalan told RFE/RL's Radio Farda that the campaign members are not expecting that their campaign will lead to changes in the discriminatory laws any time soon. But she added that "so far we have succeeded in changing Iranian people's attitude toward such laws."

"We haven't achieved too many results. But we were able to give this issue a bigger profile in society, and succeeded in bringing the society's attention -- both men and women's attention -- to the fact that promoting women's rights could well be a part of the wider promotion of democratic values," Ardalan said.

Members of the campaign and other supporters -- most of them young women in their 20s -- spread their message through the Internet and print media as well as in face to face meetings with people all over the country -- and it comes with a heavy price for the feminists.

The campaign claims it is a social movement that has "nothing against religion or the Iranian political system."

Yet at least 40 of its members have been detained by the police and intelligence services, and most of them have been charged with spreading propaganda against the state.

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Maryam Khosenkah and Jelveh Javaheri are among the campaign members who have been arrested in Tehran since October 2007. They have been subsequently released on large bails and are still awaiting a court decision.

Iranian intelligence services persecute the campaign supporters all over the country. Two young feminists, Ronak Safarzadeh and Hana Abdi, were arrested last fall by the local office of the Intelligence and Security Ministry in Kurdistan Province. They are still in prison.

Parvin Ardalan says that during such a difficult period --when women's rights activists are being persecuted and feminist publications are being shut down in Iran -- she believes that the Olof Palme Award will give the One Million Signatures Campaign greater recognition and provide hope to its activists inside Iran and its supporters outside the country.

(Radio Farda correspondent Farin Assemi contributed to this report.)

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