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## Zahra Rahnavard: 'I will sacrifice my life for freedom & democracy'

created 06/09/2010 - 11:55



*The following is an interview between wife of opposition leader Zahra Rahnavard and Italian daily La Repubblica which was published yesterday:*

With her floral Turkmen head scarf and jean shirt worn under her black yet lacy chador, Zahra Rahnavard has been quickly transformed into the most recognized and well known woman in Iran during the elections of the past 30 years. Her image, even more than that of her husband's, Mir Hossein Mousavi, the candidate for the presidential elections in Iran, has not only been the focus of attention on numerous occasions both by domestic and foreign media outlets, but also has become a hot discussion topic amongst both her supporters and those who oppose her. She has been attacked many times both by her own opponents and by those who oppose her husband..

Dr. Zahra Rahnavard, artist, sculptor, and university professor, viewed by many social and political activists as a well known advocate for culture, art and politics was asked whether she was satisfied with the manner in which her husband defended her during last year's presidential debates.

He repeatedly apologized to the Iranian women. In response to attacks by the opposing election candidate on to his wife (Zahra Rahnavard), Mr. Mousavi stated that he views her as the most open minded Iranian woman. Ms. Rahnavard's response to this comment is as follows "Mr. Mousavi's comments were symbolic. He may view me as an example amongst many Iranian women, as he [Mousavi] has a lot of respect for all Iranian women."

When ever someone asks Ms. Rahnavard about her husband Mr. Mousavi, she responds "I am first and foremost Rahnavard and then Mousavi's wife."

**Ms Rahnavard how did you and your husband endure the constant pressure of the past few months on your lives?**

This past year the people of Iran have been exposed to all types of pressure and hardship, only for asking the question "where is my vote?". This question could have been answered by the ruling government in a legal and peaceful manner. However, the ruling government chose to respond in a most oppressive manner to such a simple and democratic question, arresting and imprisoning and firing bullets at those who dared to pose such a question. Today the demands of the people of Iran are freedom, democracy, rule of the law and free and fair elections. These demands are much more extensive than those presented during the initial protests. It is therefore only normal that when our people are experiencing such hardship, that I, Mr. Mousavi, Mr. Karroubi, Mr. Khatami and their families also face physical trauma, or numerous shocks and charges.

**Almost one year ago, you were certain of victory in the elections. Today, under the current circumstances, how do you feel when you look back at those days? Do you feel a sense of anger, surrender, hope or sadness?**

Iran's Green movement seeks prosperity for all Iranians. This when the current ruling government has only lead to further poverty, threatening the fundamental freedom of our people. The past elections were a golden opportunity that was taken away from the people of Iran and this is a real pity.

**You and your husband experience constant threats on your lives. Are you not afraid? Do you**

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not feel in any danger? Have you ever thought about leaving your country?

I have never once pondered leaving Iran. Of course before the revolution in Iran, due to the oppression and political limitations under the Shah's regime I was in the United States and along with my husband was active in organizations such as the Islamic Students of Iran, both in the U.S and in Europe. Today we have been transformed from simple people to well known, effective individuals. Now, much more than in the past, our destiny and future is intertwined with the destiny and future of the nation of Iran. Iran is the place I have selected to live in and to die in. The rest is up to God. With regards to fear, I have never feared any individual or regime in my entire life. I will only fear God when I have not met my responsibilities as a free human being. In comparison to the past, Mousavi is also speaking with courage and much much more daringly. He will never compromise his ideals.

The street protests were much more extensive than predicted and expected by many. Your husband was transformed from a "highly specialized and technical " individual to a beloved and charismatic leader. Was this more than he expected? Did you knowingly submit yourself to the Iranian people's movement?

When it comes to the 10th presidential elections held last year, Mousavi, the nation of Iran and I had many expectations. Everyone was looking for improvements in the country's conditions and fundamental change. Individual freedom, lack of interference in the daily lives of the women and men of our nation, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, were only some of the demands and dreams of our nation. The people's protests and our collaborative action have been based on mutual desires. However, one thing cannot be denied, that the Iranian people have always been ahead of us and leading us towards their ideals. When the ruling government refused to respond to a natural question by the people of Iran such as "where is my vote?", resorting to imprisonment, arrests and bullets, then it was only natural for ordinary individuals to become well known and beloved symbols. Mousavi is only one such individual fortunate to have been embraced by the people of Iran.

Are any discussions currently taking place with the ruling government? Are there any attempts to improve the tension and improve current conditions?

Everyone is open and willing to work on resolving the current tensions and difficulties. Unfortunately the ruling government is only after violence. They only seek to oppress and imprison those who criticize and protest. It seems that they are not interested in solving the problems. I believe that based on their current behavior the ruling government is trying to overthrow the Islamic Republic; something that neither I, Mousavi, Karroubi or the people of Iran are after. As such, under these circumstances, there can be no discussions.

I would like to emphasize that the Green movement is a reform seeking and peaceful movement. The 12, 15 and 20 of June are three important dates in the Green movement of the people of Iran and the presence of millions in the streets on these days will be good news for the future victory of the movement.

What message would you like to give to the world on behalf of the Green movement? What can the world do to help and what actions should they refrain from?

The Green movement and the demands of the people are completely national, Iranian, people based and internal to Iran. They are not dependent on or associated with any forces outside of Iran. However, the progressive thoughts of the world should naturally be towards protecting the rights of countries and the world wide support of those who seek freedom. Though the public abroad must be careful that their governments support the freedom fighters in Iran in their dealings with the Iranian government, in the end the people of Iran are responsible for their own destiny and resolving their issues.



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In the past months there have been many reports of executions, rapes and violence against prisoners. How do you react to these issues? Would you like to express your thoughts regarding these matters?

I am fundamentally against any form of violence against anyone. In Iran and within the Green movement we have groups such as artists, journalists, human rights activists, student activists, sports personalities and other groups such as teachers, workers, students and women's organizations. In addition, tribes and races with a variety of languages and religions live in Iran, all of which can be used as a good opportunity for Iran and the ruling government in Iran, that is, if they take them all under their wings. National unity can be emphasized and made stronger all while respecting the diversity, cultural, ethnic and linguistic rights of the minority who live in Iran. Only then will we witness no violent acts by any group, or people in Iran. I am against any form of violence, including executions. More importantly, the procedures leading to executions should be reviewed. It is important for me to believe that these executions were necessary and based on legal rights and not politically motivated.

**If you were to predict today, how do you think this tug of war will end?**

Our nation will be victorious and will reach their ideals. This success is because of the stability, strength and resilience of the people and reflects their knowledge and awareness. The rights of the people will prevail even if it takes time.

A modern world does not tolerate dictatorship and tyranny. The digital world of the internet and information dissemination is a world that demands democracy, freedom and personal expression and Iran is part of this world.

**Have you ever thought about giving up?**

Never! Why would I ever have such an ominous thought? I have committed myself to God and I am hopeful to shed the last drop of my blood in the cause of freedom and democracy. The rest is in the hands of God.

**You are a symbol for many women who have entered the scene. What would you like to say with regards to the role of women in the Green Movement?**

The current ruling government has focused on oppressing women over the past year. I experienced this personally for the first time this year. The head of their government attacked me in a television debate with Mousavi, questioning my character; although this behavior only led to him being the laughing stock of the nation. Women have been one of the staunch supporters of the Green movement as such the ruling government has focused on oppressing women. However, this oppression has had no affect on their resolve and they have not backed down.

The demands of the women in Iran are twofold 1) National demands such as freedom, democracy, the rule of the law, freedom of political prisoners, right to individual freedoms 2) Elimination of discrimination and strengthening of cultural rights, women's rights and equal rights under the law.

As I have said repeatedly in the past, democracy is not possible without women and without paying attention to the demands of women.

**Have the nuclear issues had any effects on the conditions that occurred after the elections?**

The ruling government takes advantage of the nuclear issue. On the surface they make strong statements but in the end they cooperate and seek negotiations with other countries. This is due to their utter lack of legitimacy. Because of their lack of legitimacy inside Iran, on an international level they make concessions towards other countries in order to build legitimacy for themselves. However, when a nation is not in sync with its own government, that government has no prestige anywhere in the world. I am hopeful that the people of Iran will prevail and that we can bring democracy to the people of Iran as soon as possible.

*Translation by Negar Irani*



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