

NATION OF EXILES

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Project Summary

Nation of Exiles is a short documentary film that traces the civil and political unrest that has taken place in Iran since June 2009. Following the re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on June 12, public demonstrations and protests cast doubt upon the future of the country's leadership. The film outlines the history of Iranian politics and examines two factors that contributed greatly to the size and scope of the 2009 protests: the Iranian women's movement and the new generation of internet-based communication technology.

As political demonstrations intensified in Iran and amateur cyber-journalists fueled a media frenzy, a new revolution seemed inevitable. But were major political changes ever a real possibility, or were the events just nostalgic sentiments recalling the Islamic Revolution of 1979?

The following narrative summary encompasses many of the topics that may be discussed in subject interviews, and subsequently appear in the film.

Brief Dynastic History

Iran has a long history of civil wars and political change, dating back to the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736), which many historians credit with founding the modern nation-state of Iran. By the 17th century, Great Britain and Imperial Russia had already started establishing colonial footholds in the region. As a result, Iran's last great conqueror, Nadir Shah, lost sovereignty over many outlying provinces to these foreign occupiers.

The Constitutional Revolution and the Roots of the Women's Movement

Beginning in 1905, a constitutional revolution took place, which allowed Nadir Shah to remain in power but established the first Majlis, or parliament, which convened on October 7, 1906. Around the same time, the early cores of consciousness of women's rights (or lack thereof), began to take shape, although the low social status of women and the clandestine operation of their organizations has allowed for limited data on the subject. It is known that the first weekly magazine founded by a women's society, *Danesh*, was published in 1910. Over the next several decades, women's influence in Iranian culture and social politics would increase.

Discovery of Oil

The discovery of oil in 1908 caused control of Persia to become highly contested between the United Kingdom and Russia. The unstable Qajar government was ousted by a military coup in 1921, establishing Reza Khan, an officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade, as the dominant figure for the next 20 years. After serving as Prime Minister for several years, Reza Shah became the king of Iran and established the Pahlavi Dynasty.

The Pahlavi Dynasty

Reza Shah established an authoritarian government that can be described as nationalist, militarist, and secularist. He endorsed strict censorship and issued state propaganda. Reza Shah introduced many socio-economic reforms, reorganizing the army, government administration, and finances. He required mosques to use chairs, imposed upon citizens western clothing including brimmed hats, encouraged women to discard the hijab, and allowed mixing of the sexes. These policies caused political clashes with Iran's clergy and devout Muslims.

During World War II, British and Soviet forces staged a massive occupation of Iran's borders. Iran was a vital oil-supply source and link in the allied supply line for lend-lease (read: war) supplies to the Soviet Union, and the allies were concerned over the Shah's tacit pro-German sympathies. The British left the Shah no choice but to abdicate in favor of his pro-British son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

There were hopes that post-occupation Iran could become a constitutional monarchy. The new, young Shah Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi initially took a very hands-off role in government, and allowed parliament to hold a lot of power. Elections were initially shaky amidst allegations of corruption. Parliament became chronically unstable, and from 1947 to 1951 Iran saw the rise and fall of six different prime ministers.

Mosaddeq

In 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq sought to nationalize the British-owned oil industry, which led to his popularity domestically but caused international friction. As foreign agents began to interfere in Iranian politics, tension among the Majlis escalated to the point that Mosaddeq resigned—which only led to additional civil unrest. Mosaddeq was reinstated by the Shah and given emergency powers, which he used to strengthen democratic institutions within Iran and limit the monarchy's authority.

Operation Ajax

Mosaddeq's nationalization of Iranian oil was less successful than expected, and a British boycott was causing the Iranian citizenry to suffer a lower standard of living, which led to dissent among Mosaddeq's political allies. The British government was increasingly distressed over Mosaddeq's policies and the loss of control of Iranian oil, and deployed agents to dissolve Mosaddeq's coalition, most importantly the support of the clergy.

To swing public opinion against Mosaddeq, Winston Churchill, at a time of high Cold War fears, expressed concern regarding Iran's shift toward the Soviet sphere of influence, and Britain and the United States began to publicly denounce Mosaddeq's policies as domestically harmful. Soon after, Mosaddeq cut all diplomatic relations with the British. The CIA responded by launching a black propaganda campaign against Mosaddeq and stirring dissent within the religious

community. In August 1953, the Shah formally dismissed Mosaddeq to give some impressions of legitimacy to what was ultimately a secret coup. Fake protestors hired by the CIA ransacked Mosaddeq's house, and he surrendered the next day.

The new government, meanwhile, quickly reached an agreement with a consortium of foreign oil companies, with the U.S. and Great Britain receiving the majority of Iran's oil.

Iran was ruled as an autocracy under the shah with American support from that time until the revolution. The Iranian with the foreign companies which ran the Iranian oil facilities for the next 25 years, splitting profits fifty-fifty with Iran but not allowing Iran's ministers to audit their accounts or have members on their board of directors. In 1957, martial law was ended after 16 years and Iran became closer to the West by joining the Baghdad Pact and receiving military and economic aid from the US.

The White Revolution

In 1961, Iran initiated a series of economic, social, agrarian and administrative reforms to modernize the country that became known as the Shah's White Revolution. The core of this program was land reform. Modernization and economic growth proceeded at an unprecedented rate, fueled by Iran's vast petroleum reserves, estimated to be the third-largest in the world. However the reforms, including the White Revolution, did not greatly improve economic conditions, and the liberal pro-Western policies alienated certain Islamic religious and political groups.

Ayatollah Khomeini

Beginning in January 1963, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose in opposition to the Shah, denouncing his policies and condemning his submission to the U.S. and Israel. Khomeini issued a manifesto bearing the signature of eight top religious scholars and listed the various ways that the Shah had allegedly spread moral corruption and violated the constitution. Khomeini was subsequently arrested, which set off several days of rioting until his release. Khomeini was arrested again in 1964 and sent into exile, where he remained for the next 14 years.

The Islamic Revolution

There is a great deal of scholarly debate regarding the direct cause of the Islamic revolution within Iran, although most agree that the Shah's decline was linked to a series of domestic and foreign policy failures combined with a secular and personalized government that allowed citizens little political freedom. The Shah was responsible for the high price of oil exports, which caused friction with foreign governments doing business with Iran. As his political popularity dwindled, the first militant anti-Shah demonstrations occurred after the death of Khomeini's son in 1977. Within a year, massive union strikes and demonstrations took place throughout the country.

In 1979, Khomeini returned from exile and transformed Iran from a monarchy under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, to an Islamic republic under his own leadership. A new constitution was drafted giving Khomeini a powerful post as guardian jurist Supreme Leader, and clerical Guardian Council power over legislation and elections.

The ideology of the revolutionary government was populist, nationalist, and most of all, Shi'a Islamic. Khomeini's tenure as the Supreme Leader of Iran was marked by the consolidation of the revolution into a theocratic republic, and by the war with Iraq. Khomeini solidified his leadership through the systematic execution of thousands of political prisoners, leading to international criticism for Iran's deteriorating respect for human rights and lack of transparency.

Women and the Islamic Republic

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the status of Iranian women quickly deteriorated. Many of the rights that women had gained under the Shah were systematically abolished over time through legislation, which restricted women from being employed and enforced wearing the Hijab. Many of these codes are based on Islamic Shar'ia law, which has led to a set of polarized and unique feminist ideologies in Iran. However, it is generally accepted that most Islamic or Muslim feminists are those women's rights advocates who seek to improve the status of women through more favorable or "dynamic" interpretations of Islamic law. The most recent major development that has occurred through the efforts of women's rights advocates in Iran was the initiation of women's studies programs at the Master of Arts level at several large Iranian universities, which are purposed to help promote gender-neutral points of view.

Exiles

Beginning prior to the Islamic revolution, but extending over the duration of Khomeini's tenure, many notable Iranian intellectuals, artists, poets, and cultural figures left the country due to their disapproval or fear of the Iranian government. This community of expatriates is responsible for much of the celebrated Iranian art and literature that has circulated around the world over the last two decades. These individuals also provide a unique perspective into events that have occurred and are currently occurring within their homeland.

Political Protests

The roots of the recent civil unrest, including the vocal and highly televised political protests taking place in Iran, can be traced back to the presidency of reformist leader Mohammad Khatami. Students-- in particular Iranian women--played a significant role in Khatami's election, hoping to loosen Islam's restrictions on women. Tensions between the reform-minded government and the conservative clergy eventually led to massive anti-government protests in 1999.

Khatami was re-elected in June 2001, but the Islamic Guardian Council blocked his reform efforts. Conservative elements within Iran's government moved to undermine the reformist movement, banning liberal newspapers and disqualifying candidates for parliamentary elections. This clampdown on dissent, combined with Khatami's failure to reform the government, led to growing political apathy among Iran's youth.

Women's Rights Demonstrations

In June 2003, anti-government protests by several thousand students took place in Tehran. Again, women played a large part in the demonstrations, demanding improvements in Iranian civil law and changes to what they perceive to be institutional discrimination under the protection of religious laws. Iranian women remain second-class citizens in criminal matters, divorce, and child custody and inheritance cases, mostly due to the strict interpretation of Islamic laws prescribed in the Iranian constitution.

Electoral Disqualifications

In 2004, the Guardian Council disqualified the election ballots of more than 2,000 candidates, including a large number of reformist ballots, allowing hardliners to gain control of contested council seats around the country. Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi responded by stating that elections cannot be free if candidates must be approved by government's vetting body, and noted that many candidates had not been approved simply because they had criticized the government.

Ahmadinejad

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran, became the sixth president of Iran, after winning 62 percent of the vote. Initially popular, Ahmadinejad has become a controversial figure both within and outside of Iran. He has drawn domestic criticism for his economic lapses and disregard for human rights. He is a fervent support of Iran's nuclear program and an outspoken critic of the United States foreign policy and Israel. He has also been criticized for describing the Holocaust as a myth, which led to accusation of anti-Semitism.

In 2006, several human rights demonstrations took place in protest of Iran's lack of gender equality and political or religious freedom. Subsequently, Ahmadinejad and his allies failed to dominate ballot returns in national and local elections as voters shifted toward more moderate policies. Iranian women made a major turnout, not only as voters, but also as candidates for council positions. Ahmadinejad's fundamentalist government made it easier for men to take more than wife while restricting public sector careers for women. In 2008, Iranian parliamentary elections featured 7,000 registered candidates, 600 of whom were women.

2009 Elections and Protests

On June 12, 2009, Ahmadinejad claimed victory to his second presidential term with a 62% vote against Mir-Hossein Mousavi. The election drew unprecedented public interest in Iran. Both parties, who claimed that electoral fraud had occurred, disputed the election results. On June 13, clashes broke out between police and groups protesting the election results in Iran, and solidarity protests took place in London and New York City.

By June 14, protests had grown considerably in scope and violence, leading Al Jazeera to describe the situation as, “the biggest unrest since the Islamic Revolution.” Protests seemed to be spontaneous without any formal organization. On June 15, Mousavi made his first post-election appearance before more than 100,000 supporters in Tehran’s Freedom Square. On June 16, thousands of people massed in the streets of Tehran again, prompting security forces to raid university dormitories, which led to resignation of 120 Tehran University professors who joined the protests.

Social Networks

Over the next month, eyewitness accounts, images, and footage from demonstrators and journalists within Iran began to feature prominently on social networking websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

The global media attention caused a swell of worldwide support as the protests began to take a more violent turn and more demonstrators were arrested. The special police that were once separating the protestors from the Basiji pro-government militias were now firing tear gas into crowds to disperse demonstrations.

Neda Soltan

On June 20, a young Iranian woman Neda Soltan, was shot by the Basij and died in front of video cameras in Tehran. The highly graphic video spread quickly online and Soltan became the definitive image of the events that were taking place on the streets. Human Rights groups and U.S. President Barak Obama issued statements urging the Iranian government to end violence against protestors.

Missing Funds

Peaceful demonstrations continued to take place, leading to a march of nearly two million people through the streets of Tehran on July 17, including reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi. During the public Friday prayer service, police used tear gas against the crowd. Corruption seemed rampant throughout Iranian government, as, in the midst of the panic regarding the uncertainty of the government’s future, \$118 billion went missing from the Iranian treasury. Several weeks later, the Turkish government humorously acknowledged a divine gift of (gasp!) \$118 billion, which had mysteriously appeared in the national treasury.

Trials

Beginning in August, a series of public trials was held to determine the fates of prominent reformists, intellectuals, and academics that were arrested during the protests. Amidst allegations of sexual abuse and torture, the trials were condemned throughout the world as a farce. Iran's government issued several statements denying the claims, although three separate U.N. human rights experts have urged the claims to be investigated.

On August 3, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei formally endorsed Ahmadinejad as President, and he was sworn in on August 5. Several high-ranking Iranian political figures appeared to avoid the ceremony. Opposition leaders on reformist websites and blogs asked protestors to launch new street demonstrations on the day of the inauguration ceremony. On August 5, riot police used batons and pepper spray to break up hundreds of protestors at parliament. This was the last major public demonstration, and media coverage of events has since waned.

Methodology

The story behind the demonstrations remains the people who took part in the movement, the obstacles and risks they encountered, and how they were able to overcome the inertia of the situation to make their voices heard. As immediately as the political unrest seemed to arise, it evaporated. However, the images and imprint of the events remain posted on YouTube and Facebook, as a reminder of our global community and the power of the human spirit.

The Atlantic's Andrew Sullivan gauged the significance of the phenomenon, stating, "That a new information technology could be improvised for this purpose so swiftly is a sign of the times. It reveals in Iran what the Obama campaign revealed in the United States. You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before."

If nothing else, the legacy of these events could become the emergence of social media as a global tool for civil and human rights.

Regarding Iran, questions persist, and the nature of Iran's identity and political future remain unclear: After 5,000 years of civilization, why is Iran not a world leader in any major socio-political categories? What has caused Iran to become so isolated from other global nations? Does Iran have a unified social, cultural, or political identity?

The Iranian people live perpetually in conflict, each day newly faced with something worth fighting and dying for. Their struggle continues.

Perspectives

Nation of Exiles examines the events that took place in Iran over the summer of 2009 through several key perspectives. One narrative thread is provided by Ali Azad and Mazyar Tabari, who are social activists conversant with the history and motivations behind the Iranian civil rights struggle. Both men were born and raised in Iran and have published literature and participated in demonstrations against the Islamic Republic.

The testimonials of Mr. Azad and Mr. Tabari is accompanied by analysis from Hamid Dabashi, Ph.D., Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He explains Iran's political history, examine the causes of civil unrest, and postulate on the significance of events and what their legacy might be. Professor Dabashi's insight provides a critical understanding of what is at stake within Iran, both politically and culturally.

The third narrative thread is provided by journalist and professor Ellen Angelotti of the Poynter Institute, who explores the role of social networks in spreading the messages of the Iranian people around the globe. Ms. Angelotti examines the disconnect between state-controlled Iranian news agencies and global media, as well as provide perspective into the impact and potential of social networking as tools to improve civil and human rights.

Nation of Exiles progresses through a chronology of events suited to a journalism-style narrative. Imagery is built around this framework to create a sense of "being on the ground" during the protests. The "What" is provided by an eyewitness account, accompanied by news footage and images of the protests. The "Why" is answered through an informed scholarly analysis of the events, supported by a historical perspective of Iran's political landscape. Finally, the "How" is demonstrated by examining the role of social networking tools during the unrest.

Imagery

Images is compiled from a variety of sources. Some pre- and post-election news coverage is gathered from Iranian news sites, as well as Arab media outlet Al-Jazeera. News footage and images of demonstrations and protests is chosen from American and British sources including CNN and BBC. Finally, Internet video posted by amateur journalists and Iranian citizens is also featured to give audiences a sense of not only the uncertainty and chaos on the streets, but also of the unity and fearlessness of the Iranian people. Interviews and supplemental footage is lensed in high-definition on the JVC GY-HM700 camera.

Budget and Timeline

It is my hope to produce this documentary for less than \$2,000. Outstanding expenses include the cost of travel associated with conducting interviews in New York or Washington D.C., and the cost of acquiring news footage and related imagery from major media outlets.

Equipment, studio time, and post-production services have been provided in part by SMU Meadows School of the Arts and by Magic Video. The current budget assumes that principal photography is completed by December 2009 and post-production is completed by March 2010. *Nation of Exiles* premieres at SMU in April 2010.

Key Talent

Bavand Karim is an Associate Producer with Lioness Media Arts, Inc., an Emmy Award-winning production company in Dallas, Texas. Bavand also produces Mother Earth News Radio with host Andrea Ridout on the IRN/USA Radio Network. A journalist and writer, Bavand recently served as an editor for *The Dallas Morning News'* award-winning sports section, *SportsDay*. Bavand completed his M.F.A. in Cinema and Television at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts. He is a first-generation Iranian-American and second-generation anthropologist.

Assisting Mr. Karim is cinematographer Bobby Mosaedi. Mr. Mosaedi is director of photography and multimedia specialist and Magic Video, a full-service production company located in Dallas, Texas. Mr. Mosaedi's technical and editorial expertise adds an enhanced degree of legitimacy to the project.

Please Help!

It is with optimism that I ask for your support in bringing this project to life. I look forward to engaging this topic with the hopes creating a final product that captures the revolutionary spirit of events and sends a powerful message of solidarity.