

We are iran: the persian blogs

NASRIN ALAVI



ALL PHOTOS: RAMIN TALAIE/DOCUMENT IRAN

From top to bottom, three bloggers located in Tehran, Iran: feminist writer Parastoo Dokoohaki (www.parastood.com); web designer Payam Parsinejad (www.tafteh.ws); and Muslim cleric and former government minister Mohammad Ali Abtahi (www.webneveshteha.com). None of the Iranians pictured on these pages are quoted in this excerpt.

Over the Internet, voices are emerging from Iran. A woman writes about what types of clothing attract men. A mother debates whether to let her daughter get her nose pierced. A young man loses faith because the mosques are filled with “hypocrites, thugs, and oppressors.” This is not the Iran we read about in newspaper headlines, but the everyday Iran experienced by its citizens and chronicled in the new book *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (Soft Skull Press), by Nasrin Alavi.

A blog (short for “weblog”) is someone’s online journal, a sort of public diary that can be read on the Internet. In Iran, where the ruling clerics have placed severe restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, blogs offer a way for people to circumvent the state-controlled media and communicate directly with one another about their lives. Since the first Iranian blog appeared in 2001, Farsi, the predominant language in Iran, has become the fourth-most-frequently-used tongue for online journals, more common than Spanish, German, Italian, Chinese, or Russian.

An expatriate Iranian journalist, Alavi spent her formative years in Iran but attended college in Great Britain, where she lives today. Her English translations of Farsi blogs give Westerners unprecedented access to the people of Iran and provide an alternative recent history of the nation. “When so much of the attention directed at the Islamic world is focused on violence and terrorism,” Alavi writes, “blogs offer outsiders a fresh perspective on the lives of ordinary men and women, relaying their experiences — their fears, dreams, disappointments, and insecurities — and allowing us to eavesdrop on the clandestine conversations of a closed society.”

The following excerpts are taken from *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs*. © 2005 by Nasrin Alavi. They are reproduced here by permission of Soft Skull Press, Inc. The e-mail addresses and websites given belong to actual Iranians. Some blogs are signed only with a pen name, because the author wishes to remain anonymous for his or her safety.

— Ed.

November 17, 2004

I keep a blog so that I can breathe in this suffocating air. In a society where one is taken to history’s abattoir for the mere crime of thinking, I write so as not to be lost in my despair, so that I feel that I am someplace where my calls for justice can be uttered. I write a blog so that I can shout, cry and laugh, and do the things that they have taken away from me in Iran today.

E-mail: lolivash@yahoo.com

Website: lolivashaneh.blogspot.com

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, honest self-expression carries a heavy price. Over the last six years, as many as a

hundred print publications, including forty-one daily newspapers, have been closed by Iran's hard-line judiciary. In April 2003 the Islamic Republic became the first government to take direct action against bloggers. Many more bloggers and online journalists have been arrested or intimidated since.

October 30, 2003

Islam is compatible with democracy.*

*Subject to terms and conditions.

E-mail: weblog@ksajadi.com

Website: ksajadi.com/fblog

In recent years the Iranian people have demonstrated their desire for change by overwhelmingly voting for parliamentary candidates who promise democracy. In the 1997 presidential election, 70 percent of voters voted for the little-known cleric Mohammad Khatami, giving his reform agenda enormous backing. Khatami won the next election with a similar majority. He even carried Qom, the religious bastion of Iran.

But substantive change has been blocked by the hard-liners who hold the real power through the judiciary and the Guardian Council, a conservative supervisory body. They have abolished the reformist press, forbidden reform candidates from running, and arrested, tortured, or assassinated many liberals and student activists.

The unelected Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the conservative clerics and lawyers control the courts, the army, the media, the political councils, and the powerful Islamic foundations that very nearly run the economy. In February 2004 the conservatives banned more than two thousand candidates from running in parliamentary elections, dropping any pretense of democracy and reasserting full control over the state. In the 2005 presidential election, conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner.

The Islamic hard-liners have a single mission: to uphold the principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which began as a pro-democracy movement to overthrow the shah, an absolute monarch. Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini spoke of freedom and democracy, and initially his government was dominated by liberal figures who promised an end to political repression. Only days after the fall of the shah, however, Iran's new regime hurriedly established revolutionary tribunals, where many figures from the previous regime were sentenced to death after summary trials. Within two years, Iran was a theocracy governed by severe Islamic law, with Ayatollah Khomeini established as Supreme Leader. Iranians had traded one unaccountable regime for another.

August 9, 2003

As your average five-year-old boy, I was crazy about toy cars of all varieties and colors. During an ordinary outing to the shops, my father refused to buy me a toy car; I threw your run-of-the-mill temper tantrum and was carried kicking and screaming into a taxi.

I hated my father and wanted him hanged like all the people that they were executing on our television screens. There were

no children's programs on TV. Everything was suspended, and we would sit and watch as they hanged and hanged.

Even at the tender age of five I knew who the Savakis [the shah's secret service] were. I believed every bad person was a Savaki, and at that moment in time, that included my father.

I started talking to the taxi driver, who acknowledged me with a smile.

"Hey, Mister."

"What is it?"

"My dad is a Savaki!"

The driver abruptly placed his foot on the brake and started cursing my dad. Thank God my father could talk to people, and soon they were both laughing at me.

How many Savakis do you know? When will we stop hanging people who don't give us the toy cars we want?

E-mail: daftaresepid@yahoo.com

Website: daftaresepid.blogspot.com

Under the Islamic regime, cultural and political restraints regarding speech, appearance, and relations between the sexes were strictly enforced in public. Meanwhile Iran was attacked by neighboring Iraq, setting off a war that would last eight years.

January 8, 2004

You have heard the story of my generation many times. A generation that grew up with bombs, rockets, war, and revolutionary slogans, a generation that had battle green, grenade-shaped piggy banks.

The girls of my generation will never forget their teachers tugging hard at tiny strands of hair that somehow fell out of their veils. The boys of my generation will never forget being slapped five times in the face for wearing shirts with Western labels on them.

My generation is the damaged generation. We were constantly chastised that we were duty-bound to safeguard and uphold the sacred blood that was shed for us during a revolution and a war. Any source of happiness was forbidden.

My generation would be beaten up outside cinemas or pizza restaurants; punished in the public parks; kicked and punched in the centers of town by the regime's militia.

For my generation talking to a member of the opposite sex (something quite ordinary for today's younger generation) was akin to adultery, and its punishments are better left unsaid.

But I also remember the start of the reform movement [in the late 1990s]. This same generation would distribute election pamphlets and posters for Khatami. And even for this we were reprimanded and beaten, but we stood up for him so that one day hope might come. It's unfair to say he did nothing. We got concerts, poetry readings, carefree chats in coffee shops, and tight manteaus [women's overcoats]. But is this all that my generation wanted?

It was also during this time that student activists were thrown in prison, newspapers were shut down — and yet Khatami was silent. It was at this time that the students of my generation were labeled hooligans and Western lackeys, and again

Khatami appeared to agree through his silence.

Even the subsequent parliamentary elections of reformists did not bring any benefits for my generation. Sometimes hearing the words of the enemy from the mouths of those you considered friends is even harder to bear.

E-mail: arareza@gmail.com
Website: dentist.blogspot.com

Those who lived through the Islamic Revolution almost a quarter of a century ago are now a minority. More than 70 percent of the population of Iran is under thirty, and for this population, literacy rates are well over 90 percent, even in rural areas. More than half of those graduating from college in Iran today are women. Iran's younger generation has been completely transformed through the Islamic Republic's policies of free education and national literacy — and they are ready and willing to express their frustration.

August 8, 2002

What have the likes of me learned after twelve years of formal religious education? What is the outcome of being consistently bombarded with sacred information in this Islamic Republic of ours?

1. When you talk about your religion for over twenty years, its problems will be highlighted.
2. Religious education is the best way to create agnostics in the modern world. Just look around at the people you know personally who went to the infamously strict Islamic schools.
3. Even those most addicted to religion will at some point overdose.
4. The problem is not with Islam but with a few of our radical fellow Muslims.

The other day I saw a construction worker fast asleep next to a cement mixer; he appeared to have developed a deaf ear to all that noise. We are like him: after so many years of being bombarded with religious facts, you just stop hearing them.

E-mail: lbahram@yahoo.com
Website: lbahram.blogspot.com

Young Iranians are caught in the conflict between globalization and tradition. The Internet and satellite television have opened the world to them. An assertive generation of educated women is entering previously forbidden domains. The strictly enforced rules of the regime — no alcohol, no dancing, and no pop music — were intended to create “soldiers for Islam,” but now many young people aspire to a more Western lifestyle.

October 29, 2003

My daughter wanted to get her nose pierced. I resisted and told her that she was bound to regret it and that she should wait until she was a bit older and then decide for herself. She looked at me then and said: “Piercing your nose is no big deal. Maybe I will in the end regret it, but that's not the whole world. It is a small wish. By banning it, you're turning a small wish into my ultimate dream. Why do you want me to have such insignificant dreams? If I can fulfill these small wishes and not grow up with

IRAN TIMELINE

- 1953:** To protect Western oil interests, U.S. and British intelligence agencies orchestrate a coup, overthrowing the Iranian prime minister and reinstating the traditional monarch, the shah, a pro-American dictator.
- 1979:** The shah is deposed during the Iranian Revolution, and Iran becomes an Islamic republic. A president and parliament are elected, but true power is held by a council of clerics headed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini.
- 1980:** Iraq invades Iran, starting the Iran-Iraq War.
- 1988:** A cease-fire is declared, and the war ends in a stalemate.
- 1997:** Iranian voters reject the state-approved presidential candidate and elect reformist Mohammad Khatami by a wide margin.
- 2001:** Khatami is reelected, but meaningful reforms are blocked by the conservative clerics who control the government.
- 2005:** Hard-line conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is elected president.

such trivial dreams, don't you think I will have a better life waiting for me?”

We too had such insignificant wishes, and even when we grew up they didn't come true. There were so many times we wanted to go somewhere, and they wouldn't let us, and it became a dream. So many times they even stopped us from running. It came to the point that we weren't even allowed to take small steps.

This is Iran.

E-mail: faeze_am@yahoo.com
Website: faeze.blogspot.com

(end of excerpt)