

Lipstick Revolution

Zohreh Vatankhah slides into the driving seat of her BMW X3, flicks on some pulsating Persian pop and we're soon zipping along the narrow lanes near her home in northern Tehran, in the foothills of the snow-capped Alborz mountains. Most Iranians behave in traffic as if they are in charge of dodgems, not potentially lethal vehicles: but I can relax. A professional racing driver, she's used to competing, and winning, at speeds of up to 180mph.

She's glamorous, too, wearing high-heeled boots over her jeans (a controversial look in the eyes of the Iranian morality police) and a Rolex on her wrist. When she's not confounding stereotypes of Iranian women by beating men on the rally circuits, she's climbing mountains or, here, in the axis of evil, sworn enemy of the United States, watching US (banned but tolerated) satellite TV channels.

At 31, Vatankhah was born a year before Iran's Islamic revolution. In February 1978, Tehran had nightclubs and girls-about-town who dressed fashionably. A year later, the Shah had fled; Iran was reborn as an Islamic Republic and women were waking up to find their lives drastically changed. Not only obliged to cover up in public to conform with Ayatollah Khomeini's narrow interpretation of Sharia law, they were also, as Shirin Ebadi, Nobel prize winner and Iran's first woman judge, found to her cost, sidelined from senior jobs. Women, "too emotional", were no longer employed as judges.

The woman next to me looks anything but downtrodden. Yet, the tension between modernity and tradition that weighs heavily on women's lives is never far away. At one point she leans over to say: "Please, your scarf," when the bothersome piece of cloth on my head slips down.

But then something happens that could be a metaphor for the revolution that may be quietly taking place. An irate male motorist hogs the intersection and waves at her to go back. Vatankhah doesn't budge. He shouts an obscenity. She rolls down her window calmly and tells him whatever the Farsi equivalent is of shut up and get a life.

Iranian women, and not just the sporting queens or Nobel laureates, are standing up to the mullahs. And some of them are experiencing a frightening political backlash.

On our journey downtown, we pass within sight of a reminder of Iran's extraordinary recent history. This is Evin prison, where unknown numbers of political prisoners are held.

This month Alieh Egham Doost began serving a three-year sentence in Evin. Her crime was to attend a peaceful womens' protest. Dozens of other women have been sentenced, but Egham Doost is the first to be put behind bars. Her jailing

has raised suspicion that a crackdown on the nascent women's movement is under way.

Parvin Ardalan, a 39 year old Tehran journalist, helped to set up a campaign with the aim of gathering one million signatures petitioning for a fairer deal for women under the law. Despite winning Sweden's Olof Palme human rights prize last year, she has been convicted by the revolutionary courts of "acting against national security". "It was awful. We were five or six to a cell" she says of a spell on remand in Evin when she was first arrested.

Iranian women have shown extraordinary forbearance. It took 27 years after the Islamic regime was installed before they staged that first demonstration in 2006. Police reacted by beating and arresting them. So Ardalan and a few others decided to change tactics. They fan out in ones and twos going into beauty salons, schools and offices explaining how the law is stacked against half the population. How, for example, a man can divorce on a whim, while a woman has to jump through hoops – and then custody of children routinely goes to the husband; a woman can be stoned to death for adultery, whereas a man can have up to four wives and any number of "temporary" wives; a 13-year-old girl can be condemned as a criminal but the age of legal responsibility for a boy is 15; a woman's life is worth only half of that of a man or a boy. No woman can stand for the presidency. A woman must cover her head and body at all times in public, and if she refuses can be punished, sometimes in seventh-century fashion, by flogging.

The headscarf – compulsory from the age of nine is the most obvious manifestation of how Iranian women are kept in check. However, it is not the biggest worry for Iran's feminists, explains Parvin Ardalan. The hijab has become, in effect, the symbol of the revolution. Attacking it could lay the women open to charges of political activism aimed at toppling the regime. There is enough repression in the system to prevent open defiance, but it should be worrying for the authorities that many women wear their scarves with so little conviction. Out in the streets, affluent north Tehrani princesses stay just within the law, while affirming nothing about their commitment to the Islamic revolution. The scarf, often Hermès and in bright colours, is knotted under the chin, and tilted at a flattering angle to show a broad band of hair. "It signals that we obey the law, but nothing more than that," remarks Ardalan.

Tehran has become the nose-job capital of the world. Women are also having tattoos done in increasing numbers, "on the stomach and other places", as one young Tehrani told me.

Appearance, then, is as important as in the West, which is not what the Islamic revolutionaries had in mind in 1979. In the early years, red lipstick was "an insult to the blood of the martyrs".

There are women who profess to be happy with the status quo. A dozen or so of them spoke at a women's round table organised by the Iranian foreign ministry. Each had an ankle-length chador and a head covering that blocked out every wisp of hair. All held senior positions: there was an agricultural scientist, several university lecturers and academics.

Far from subjugating women, the Islamic revolution elevated them, they claimed, and female life expectancy has gone to 75 years from 58 before 1979. Rather, it was in "liberal democracies" that women were oppressed. "I have seen myself in some countries women are cleaning the streets," one speaker said. The physical punishments we found barbaric were "theoretical". "You could count on the fingers of one hand the number of stonings carried out in the past 10 years," said Fa'eze Bodaghi, a lawyer and judge.

Even if these women wanted a different set-up, they would be powerless to do much about it, since it is men who make and interpret the law. There are, of course, competing factions within Iranian politics, some more secular-minded than others. But there are only eight female MPs out of 290, and real power is wielded by the Guardian Council, an unelected body of clerics.

In the official narrative of Iran, there is scant room for public dissent. In this Iran, there are only fulfilled mothers, daughters, wives. "These rumours are just hoaxes got up by foreign enemies," Zahra Mostafavi Khomeini, the daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini retorted when I asked her what she thought of Alieh Egham Doost. Her father, the man who inspired the Islamic revolution, was a champion of fairness for women, she added. "He wanted women to play a full part in society, not just as typists or nurses. At home, he never asked his wife, even once, 'give me a cup of tea', or 'close the door'. He did it himself!"

Why Iran's dogmatists should be so eager to gag those who are articulating fairly modest demands for parity within the Sharia legal code, is in some ways puzzling. In the 30 years since the revolution, women have flocked to schools and colleges, literacy rates have rocketed and birth-control programmes have freed them from big families.

Now nearly 70 per cent of university intake is female. Millions of high-achieving women are waking up to the cultural and legal obstacles they face.

Parvin Ardalan is adamant that the signatures campaign is compatible with Islam, and has no political agenda. "We're not out to seize power. We have no interest in being a political opposition movement."

But the hardliners know just how potent a grassroots movement, such as the women's campaign, could prove. More so, since it hasn't spawned among the usual ranks, the clergy or the merchant classes, but rather in the universities, the legal profession and the blogosphere.

After the women's conference, I take a taxi to the offices of Katayoon Shahabi, 43, who against all the odds has set up her own film production company and is a regular at the Cannes, Venice and Berlin film festivals. Over tea and dates she describes the battles she had to fight when she worked for the state: "I had no authority to sign letters and they fretted over whether I would have to shake a man's hand if I went on a delegation to the West." (Even touching the hand of a man you're not married to is forbidden.)

The film producer is pragmatic; perhaps she has to be to stay within Iran's "red lines" and keep her business licence. She won't be signing the petition. Why not? "In Iran, direct confrontation doesn't work."

Open criticism is left to the daughters of the mullahs. Faezeh Rafsanjani, daughter of ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has assailed the law that gives a woman's life only half the value of a man's, while a liberal granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini is open about her support for the petition.

That campaign may now be crushed. But Iran is also approaching a fork in the road. Economic stagnation and chronic unemployment means a growing impatience with the hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

If the thaw comes, it could intensify the internal pressure for the sexual revolution in Iran. Could that pressure in turn be the spark that ignites the one thing the mullahs dread: a velvet revolution?

Curiously, it is not only the mullahs who are fearful of insurrectionist talk. "We saw the revolution and we saw war. We know that sudden change is not Iran's solution" says Shahabi. "But things are moving, like a river. And rivers, as you know, are unstoppable."