



Azar Majedi

Azar Majedi is the president of Organisation for Women's Liberation, a member of executive committee of the European Feminist Initiative and a leader of the Worker-communism Unity Party.

Right vs Left in Secularist Movement: *It is not sufficient to be a secularist*

English translation of the speech made at the International secular conference in Paris on 3 April 2009.

The women's rights movement is an integrated part of the general movement for equality and freedom. Every one here is well aware of the dismal situation of women in societies under the grip of religion; of the inherent misogyny of religion. Misogyny is an important part of the dominant ideology, so is religion. To fight misogyny and women's inequality calls for a comprehensive and consistent struggle against the dominant ideology and the dominant political and economic order.

Women's rights and socialist movements have fought against gender discrimination for over a century; it suffices to say that the 8th of March tradition is one century old. But still women are suffering from discrimination, degradation, insecurity, violence and even bondage in the 21st century. Why? Why has more than one century of struggle not resulted in women's equality? This is a very pertinent question that we as women's rights activists, freedom loving and equality seeking individuals and organisations must address. Of course there have been achievements in the west, but they are far from satisfactory.

The organisation for Women's Liberation organised an international conference for 8 March 2009 in Sweden entitled "why is secularism essential?" The conference was a real success, with contributions by around 20 activists and academics from Europe, the Middle East, Georgia and Argentina. All speakers talked about the adverse effects of religion on women's conditions in their countries and the importance of mobilizing an international movement for secularism. I am conveying their message here to you.

In the opening of the conference this same question was introduced. Just a couple of days before the conference, I read an article about Madonna's love affair with a 22 year old boy; I think it was in the Guardian. The columnist, a feminist, was applauding this relationship as one of feminism's achievements; '[W]e always hear of middle aged male rock stars' flings with young women, it is time we heard of a fem.' This was the main point of this article. As far as I am concerned, any one can go to bed with any one they like, as long as they are of age of consent and it is voluntary.

But elevating Madonna's craving for young boys and publicity to the level of achievements by women's rights movement is making a mockery of our struggle.

Our fight is to improve the lot of ordinary citizens in the world. The economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social isolation and ghettoisation, cultural degradation as well as violence and sexual abuse are our main concern. And I must say that religion as a determining ingredient of the dominant ideology plays an important part in reproducing and reinforcing all these problems for women. There has been a growing interest in secularism in women's rights movements worldwide in the past few years. This has happened because of the rise of religious movements and religious meddling in the running of society and passing legislature, thus opening people's eyes to the detrimental effect of religion in women's lives worldwide.

I was here in 2007. An important trend that was taking form then has now become quite visible and we should take notice of it and react to it. The

secularist movement has become increasingly active and vocal in the past decade, particularly after September 11th. France has always been a different case regarding secularism. This has its historical root. France is the birth place of militant secularism. Other countries in Europe have always lagged behind. Sweden now is officially a secular country. But in the UK for example secularism is very weak and rather shy.

Religious movements and establishments have gained enormous power in the 90s and onward. Political Islam has become a weighty movement, making life hell for millions, particularly women. My main concern has always been political Islam, but I had a couple of important encounters that were indeed quite eye-opening for me. I attended a secularist-feminist conference in Rome in June 2008, organised by the European Feminist Initiative. This conference brought home to me the suffocating and oppressive role of the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church and Judaism. Then the 8th of March conference organised by OWL, completed the picture of abuse, oppression and discrimination by other religions.

As religious movements became more prominent, so the secularist movement began to form and became more active. In the beginning the different trends in this movement were not so clearly distinguishable. But in the past couple of years we can discern a clear divergence. What I recognise as left and right secularism. In France we have witnessed a split in the movement. There are now two completely separate and even hostile movements. In 2007 it was one working together and organising this conference, now there are two opposing trends, one of which is not even present here. This is an important trend that we have to address.

It is not enough to be secular. Secularism alone cannot solve our problems. As it regards women's status and rights, secularism is a necessary condition, but not sufficient. For a better world, a more humane and egalitarian world we need to qualify our kind of secularism. This issue becomes even more urgent under the current economic crisis.

1. Egalitarian ideas are an important pillar of a society in which gender discrimination and inequality are to disappear.

2. With the war of terrorists you must be extra cautious not to side with any of the poles and not even appear to be taking sides with any of them. I have been a staunch proponent of forming a third pole, the pole of the civilized humanity who is not only secular, but also egalitarian in its outlook, and sets high value on freedom and fairness. We need to mobilize an international secular movement which is for the equality of all human beings regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity or nationality.

Perhaps there are people among us who have become optimistic by the election of Barak Hossein Obama, thinking and hoping that the world would become a safer and a better place. I must say that I do not share this optimism. It is true that Obama's election was a big NO to the Bush era and to neo-conservatism, but I must also add that we will not see significant changes. As far as the international situation and the so-called 'war on terror', which is in reality the war of terrorists, are concerned, there would not be much change. It is true that the US has officially dropped the term "war on terror" from its policy, but the question is, is this a move toward less militarism and bullying in real terms on the US part, or a detour imposed on it because of its defeat in its aggressive policies vis a vis the world, particularly the Middle East?

The USA was not able to succeed in this war and it is in need of rethinking its policies if it is to hold to its super power position. As ever the media savvy American ruling class has set the public opinion engineering machinery in full action to change America's image. Obama is the product of this dictated need. Obama is the best and most suitable candidate for this era of policy reconstruction and image repair.

He has some reformist ideals, he is an eloquent agitator-campaigner, and he is 'one of us', so to speak, who has 'made it' He is black, even with a Muslim name. He epitomizes the American dream. To change the image of America internationally, to appease the angry American working class and ordinary citizens in the face of the economic crisis and the greed of the 'fat cats', that is Obama's mission and vision.

The "Nowrouz" message of Obama to the Islamic Regime in Iran was one response in this direction. The war in Iraq was not only a human tragedy for people in Iraq, a total disaster for this society and its citizens, which tore it apart and intensified ethnic and religious hatred and animosity, it was also a total failure of American New World Order's policy. It did not achieve any of the goals that the US-British collaboration had envisaged. This war is by no means sustainable for the US.

We need to see this trend and be ready to respond. Islamic regime and political Islam have become much stronger as a result of war on Iraq, Lebanon and intensification of war in Palestine. The recent tragedy in Gaza made Hamas and Islamists much stronger and more prominent. We as progressive, freedom-seeking and humanitarian individuals must adapt ourselves and our movement to this new situation and adopt appropriate strategy to deal with it.

Now, let's go back to the notion of right and left secularists. What I call the right wing section of the secularist movement, has taken side with the US and state terrorism. Either stemming from their political orientation, or because of their hatred towards Islam, Islamists and political Islam, they have failed to see the dynamism and interrelation between the two poles of

regarding this war. When they outsmarted themselves, trying to justify the Israeli's murderous actions by resorting to foolish but supposedly sophisticated theories about nature of wars, claiming "*the nature of a war is not decided by the number of bodies fallen to their death on each side*", they, in fact, ended up repeating the Israeli defence Ministry's war

The right wing trend has become so obsessed with its hatred of political Islam that it justifies Geert Wilder's racism and reactionary ideas. I have written in an article that I defend Wilder's right to express his appalling ideas, because I defend unconditional freedom of expression. But, nevertheless we must state that Wilder is a bigot, a racist and a right wing



terrorism, to the very fact that these movements reinforce each other and in their fight for gaining world or regional hegemony they are lending hands to each other. They fail to see that this war has made the world a worse, a more insecure, more deprived, less humane and less free place for all of us.

They are supporting, to a greater or lesser degree, the US and Israelis' policies. Their hatred of Hamas, as a reactionary, terrorist and misogynist movement has blinded them to the atrocities and crimes of Israeli state against people of Palestine. In the recent war on Gaza, where more than one thousand people, 400 of whom were children, were killed, they either openly defended Israel or acted as apologists of Israel, justifying its war crimes. This was both appalling and sad.

I was especially saddened by the position of my Iranian ex-comrades

propaganda that Hamas is responsible, Hamas is using innocent people and so forth.

No matter how sophisticated of a theoretician they pretend to be, they are following the populist, pedestrian notion of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." An oversimplified position: if you regard political Islam as your main enemy, so you side with the US and Israel. You end up mocking high humanitarian values and regards for human lives, and see a Hamas terrorist in every 2 year old child living in the prison called Gaza.

The other side of the coin is the so-called anti imperialists who in their hatred of the US imperialism, see no fault with the filth that permeates political Islam, the brutality, cruelty, misogyny of this modern terrorist movement which uses an antiquated middle age ideology, i.e. Islam.

demagogue. But this trend either keeps silent Vis a Vis wilder's positions or elevate him to heroic stature. These cowardice positions must be exposed and we must clearly draw our demarcation from them. We are not against Muslims or Jews or Catholics. We are against Islamic, Jewish and Catholic establishment and their offensive movements in the society. Muslims are themselves victims of political Islam. We are a movement for enlightenment as well as a political movement for pushing back these forces of reaction and for building a better and more humane world. We cannot afford to loose this foresight and vision.

This takes me to the idea of the third pole, which was so brilliantly formulated by Mansoor Hekmat in its analysis of the world after September 11th. It is time to get our act together; the world has never been in such peril of misery, hardship and perhaps the war. We

need to build a strong movement, an international movement. We have seen the necessity of internationalism in our struggle. We cannot do it alone in the confine of our own country.

It is ironic that our conference coincided with two reactionary conferences: G20 and the Doha conference of Arab head of states (perhaps we should say three, taking also NATO into consideration.) The

first is trying to appease the international working class, and the ordinary citizens of the world, who are in the brink of total poverty and hunger, to be patient and control their justified anger. It is trying to convince us that it is not capitalism's fault but the fault of some reckless bankers and the stock market that have driven the world to the point of total disaster. The latter conference is the epitome of backwardness and reaction, throwing red carpets for the

most ruthless criminals, such as Al Bashir.

Our conference, which is in complete opposition to these, is trying to find real solutions to change the world to be a better place for all, a world free of discrimination, which respects the equal rights of every one. We are aware that a better world is possible and we are ready to build it.

An Open Letter to SOAS Regarding the conference: Thirty Years On, the Social and Cultural Impacts of the Iranian Revolution

Islamic Republic's Sponsorship will discredit the conference

Date: 3 June 2009

As one of the designated conference speakers, I would like to express my utmost disappointment with your last-minute decision to accept the Cultural Centre of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a conference sponsor. In many ways, this decision is in sharp conflict with the stated aims of the conference. The conference is set to research and analyse the profound contradictions existing in Iranian society between the dominant state ideology and the aspirations and the will of the people, 30 years after the Islamic regime came to power.

According to the description of the conference, however restrained and diplomatic the wording may be, one is to infer that this conference must focus on the opposing dynamic between the state and the people and between the state and social movements and cultural trends. It is a well-known fact that the Islamic Republic is a religious dictatorship that brutally suppresses any opposition. Moreover, this regime is misogynist to the core and crushes not only any effort by women's rights movements to change misogynist laws and practices, but also clamps down on any individual act of disobedience by women. We are talking about a state that imprisons and beats girls and women for not observing the veil and official dress code, for wearing makeup or even boots; a regime that has established a system of gender apartheid. This regime is known for its atrocious violation of civil rights, worker rights and human rights regarding child execution, the stoning of women and men for having sex outside marriage, execution of gays and the arbitrary imprisonment and torture of workers, students, and activists for civil rights, human rights and women's rights.

Inviting or accepting such a state as a sponsor for a conference that aims to analyse the social and cultural conditions that prevail under its rule is both disturbing and confusing. By taking this decision, the organisers of

the conference are either, compromising the outcome of the conference and undermining its credibility from an academic and scholarly point of view; or one is to assume that there is a hidden political agenda behind the organisation of this conference. The organisers are indeed promoting the Islamic Republic as an open-minded entity, interested in science and academic research into its own socio-political practices. How far from reality this portrayal is. This regime cannot even tolerate the mildest criticism and does not allow any research or scholarly work that may undermine its religious dogma. All who decide to act contrary to its dogma and rules are brutally suppressed. This decision will also send a disappointing message to those members of Iranian society who are struggling to change the state of affairs.

With deep disappointment, I must give notice that I will not participate in a conference sponsored by the Islamic Republic. To do so would grossly compromise my principles. I expect to be challenged by the argument that this collaboration is with the Cultural Centre of the Islamic Republic, with the implication that the word 'cultural' mitigates the scandalous nature of this association. To this argument, I respond that the Cultural Centre of the embassy of the Islamic Republic is its legal and official representative and its cultural ambassador. The funding they offer to the organisers is approved and allocated by the Islamic regime. Whether sponsorship is offered by the cultural, commercial or political section of the embassy, the fact remains that the sponsor is the Islamic Republic. Moreover, in a religious dictatorship that not only dominates all aspects of people's social and cultural lives, but also intervenes in their private lives, the function of a cultural centre is as political as its embassy. Finally, I regret the fact that the participants were not even informed of this decision. For my part, I became aware of it by a mere accident.

Sincerely yours,

Azar Majedi; Chair of Organisation for Women's Liberation



Maryam Kousha

‘Presidential Elections’ in Iran! What elections?!!!

On Friday 12th June people of Iran are supposed to vote for a president. The candidates are vetted for loyalty by a committee of clerics. The ultimate power over military and security matters rests with a cleric, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Women are not allowed to be candidates because according to Islam they are the weaker sex and can not make decisions! The whole thing is a sham. The row between the different candidates is over whom can more efficiently suppress people, imprison more workers, flog more women for not observing the Islamic dress code, and generally keep any unrest down.

It is 3 decades since the Islamic Republic came to power in Iran. During all this time, different presidents and prime ministers have come and gone.

All of whom have been faithful to Islamic values. The result is what everybody sees. Women have no rights or control of their lives, workers are beaten and imprisoned for organising May Day rallies, a great majority of people live under the poverty line, the streets are full of so called street children and women, homosexuals are executed, people sell their kidneys for a living, the list is endless.

The question is “what election?” At the moment the main candidates are the current president Ahmadinejad, and Mousavi . Some people in Iran will probably vote for the bad to escape the worst, i.e. protest vote. People know that all candidates have demonstrated what criminal damage they are capable of committing. Ahmadinejad is the current president with a long list of criminal record; Mousavi was the Prime Minister for nearly a decade in the 1980’s. Under

his premiership hundreds of opposition activists were executed.

The point is that they are all the products of a reactionary, misogynous, and criminal system based on political Islam. There can be no election in Iran. The idea of voting, appeals to people. However if the choice is between Hitler, Saddam Hossein and Pinochet, then it does not seem so appealing anymore. Does it?

The only way to have a true election is to overthrow the Islamic Republic and build a socialist system where human rights and prosperity are respected and exercised; where there is real opportunity for elections; where nobody is vetted by anybody; where you don’t have to have millions of Dollars to stand for elections; where people have true and genuine freedom of expression and organisation without fear of persecution.

I say what you do and you do what I say!



Obama’s speech in Cairo: *“That’s why the United States government has gone to court to protect the right of women and girls to wear the hijab, and to punish those who would deny it.”*



Mousavi, one of the presidential candidates in Iran holding his wife’s hand and thinking: *Lets hold hands, It might bring me luck! After all, that is what Mr. & Mrs Obama do!*



Azar majedi

I defend Wilders' right to express his appalling views!

Unconditional freedom of expression is the only guarantee!

Geert Wilders, the right wing Dutch MP was refused entry to UK on Thursday, on the ground that his presence would threaten public order and damage community relations. It was expressed any extremist will be refused entry to UK. This is a dangerous statement. It is a real threat to individual and civil liberty. By this argument any one who espouses any idea regarded as extreme by the British government will be banned from UK.

This is the world after September 11 and the world which has been pulled into a so-called "war on terror" by the neo-conservative US government. "Any thing will go!" Under the guise of security, any violation of human rights, human dignity and individual and civil rights will be justified. People, not only in the US, but worldwide expressed their anger and loathing for Bush and what ever he stood for. The election in the US stirred a great deal of passion, more as a big NO to Bush than a yes to Obama.

You would have expected that the Bush-Blair legacy will be wiped out. But no, it is business as usual. One might oppose to these statements, arguing that, the ban is on an anti-Islamist and not the other way around, so this has nothing to do with the war on terror. My response is: The war on terror was not, as it was proclaimed, only on Islamist terrorists. It was against individual and civil freedom we have

taken for granted in the west. It was a war on human civilization. It was a war of terrorists against the humanity.

Fear and intimidation are the tools used by the ruling classes and right wing thugs to curtail our rights and liberties as citizens. Fear and intimidation are the strongest tools against freedom and civility. Islamists have used it to gain power and use it to expand their power. The right wing governments are using the threat by the Islamists to achieve what they can otherwise not achieve so easily.

The only way to safeguard our freedom and civil rights, to ensure we live in a free society is to achieve "unconditional freedom of speech and expression." The secret is in the word "unconditional." Otherwise, we have always the big brothers to interpret the limitations and conditions, and before we know it they can take all our rights away. (And this does not only happen in the East. Nazi Germany is next door and only 60 years ago!)

I am in total opposition to Wilders' ideas. I believe he is a racist. He belongs to extreme right. He is a threat to humanity and all the good and progressive ideas developed by it. However, I defend his right to express his ideas and his right to show his appalling film. I, also, defend the right of those who oppose him, to protest against him. This is what freedom of

expression is about. If we only defended the freedom of expression for like-minded, this would be an empty gesture in defence of freedom. Ironically, this is what Wilders is doing. He campaigns for banning of Koran, and opposes the ban on his freedom of expression. This is double standard. But what else can one expect from a right wing politician?

To me, both Fitna and Koran are appalling products of backward, reactionary, discriminatory and bigot minds. I loathe them both. I am struggling to build a world free of both types of mentalities. Nevertheless, I strongly believe in unconditional freedom of expression. So, neither Fitna nor Koran should be banned. Both Wilders and Islamist should enjoy freedom of expression. Only If and when someone is putting these reactionary and racist views into practice against another human being, violating their right, the state should intervene. We should work hard to make a world that both Fitna and Koran and the like belong to the museum of pre-history.

**Against Gender
Apartheid in Iran!**

www.againstgenderapartheid.com

In defense of a young couple in Sweden Against honour killings

On 10th May a communiqué was issued by Organisation for Women's Liberation, "Never forget Pella and Fadime", and "Children First-Gothenburg branch" in condemnation of threats of honour of a couple by their families.

Organisation for Women's Liberation together with other organisations staged a picket on 11th May 09 outside the court house in Gothenburg in support of the young couple and in condemnation of honour killings.

The young woman is 19 years old and the young man is 25 years old. The couple whose romantic relationship was not approved by their families are now living on hiding after threats against their lives by their families. They have taken the case to court. For their own security they will not appear in court but will be part of the hearing via direct video link. According to the young woman she was beaten up by her family and was being forced to marry



someone against her wishes. She refused to accept such humiliating treatment, fled and married the man who she loved.

The picket and the story were covered by the press. Shahla Nouri, from Organisation for Women's Liberation said in her interview with the newspaper (Göteborgs-Posten) that

people exercising forced marriages and commit honour killings should be prosecuted. She also added that the current legislations give concession to perpetrators of honour killings under the name of "respecting other cultures". She emphasized that no exception should be allowed in the law.

Summer Camp Gothenburg

Organisation for Women's Liberation is organising a summer camp in Gothenburg/Sweden at the beginning of August 2009. Join us for 4 days of seminars, workshops,



group discussions, film viewing, swimming, walks and evening disco.

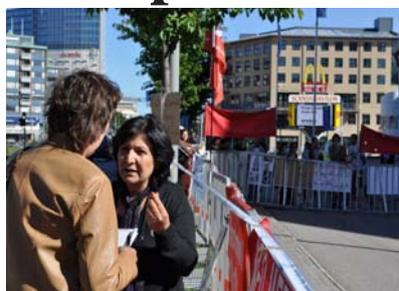
To attend, please contact **Shahla Nouri** before 10th July 2009.
shahla.n@bredband.net

www.medusahuset.se
medusahuset@telia.com
www.womensliberation.net

Protest against Islamic Republic of Iran in Gothenburg!

On 29th may 09 a demonstration was held by Organisation for Women's Liberation in protest against the presence of Iranian consulate personnel at Svenska Mässan building in Gothenburg.

The Islamic Republic of Iran knows that the opposition abroad has popularity. The regime's consulate organized a meeting to "reach out" to people. However everybody knows that their embassies are their headquarters for spying on the opposition and spread their political Islamic values and agenda. This meeting was confronted by OWL and other groups.



Karim Nouri, a member of OWL spoke to the demonstrators and the passers by about the atrocities committed by the Islamic regime in Iran and their true aims abroad. The local newspaper (GT) reported the event with the caption "They are here to spy". Shahla Nouri



also a member of OWL was interviewed by the newspaper. The heads of the Islamic regime must be tried at international courts of justice for massacre and violation of human rights in Iran. They should not be given a platform to spread their political Islamic agenda.

Our aims

Women's freedom is the measure of freedom in society. There is still a great deal left to accomplish in order to eliminate inequality between men and women, not only in Iran where misogyny brutally rules, but in the most advanced societies as well. The Organisation for Women's Liberation (OWL) sees itself as part of the immense historical and international struggle for women's liberation.

The OWL's aim is the unconditional liberation of women and complete equality between women and men in Iran. The OWL, therefore, must fight for the following demands:

- 1- *Complete equal rights for women and men; abolition of discriminatory laws, particularly laws in relation to family, marriage, divorce, and parental responsibility, for children;*
- 2- *Abolition of compulsory veiling and freedom of dress;*
- 3- *Complete abolition of segregation;*
- 4- *Access to equal resources in education, employment, sports and cultural activities;*
- 5- *Separation of religion from the state and education.*

Women in Iran

Women are banned from a wide range of social, economic and political activities; Islamic veil is compulsory. Women are separated from men in buses, universities, and many public places. Husbands and fathers are their guardians, at home and outside. Women cannot travel, even within the country, without permission from their male guardians. They have no right to divorce, or custody of their children. The list is endless.

We can change this. The Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran is the organisation with the vision and dedication to make a difference in the life of millions of women in Iran. Progression in Iran will mean progression in the region.

Join us, make donation, distribute our paper, and contact us. Together we can make a difference.

Related links:

Medusa, Journal of Women and Socialism

www.medusa2000.com

International Campaign to End Sharia Court in Canada

www.nosharia.com

Against Gender Apartheid in Iran!
www.againstgenderapartheid.com

The Organisation for Women's Liberation-Iran

www.womensliberation.net

Chairperson:

Azar Majedi

azarmajedi@yahoo.com

Editor:

Maryam Kousha

kousha.maryam@gmail.com

womensliberationiran@yahoo.com

Sweden:

Shahla Nouri, Medusahuset

shahla.n@bredband.ne

Jourtelefon: 0046(0)737 26 26 22

Tel/Fax 0046(031)-822627

UK:

Tel: +44-7772278649

Fax: +44-8701358385

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369 Green Lanes

Palmers Green,

London N13 4JH,

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