



Unveiled: Art and Censorship in Iran



SEPTEMBER 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by an independent researcher for ARTICLE 19. It was reviewed and edited by Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director, Bethan Grillo, Latin American Programme Director, and Sophie Redmond, Law Programme Officer.

This report has been compiled through a combination of background research as well as an extensive series of interviews with Iranian artists, most of whom live in exile. The response received from those living in Iran has been one of caution – only a very few, Tehran-based artists were willing to speak. This concern about conversing with a human rights organisation, or wanting to do so only under the protection of anonymity, is itself perhaps an indication of the current state of affairs. On a less pessimistic note, it is also a sense of national pride, strengthened in recent months because of the threat of war over the nuclear issue that has restrained these Iranians from speaking out against their country.

The majority of the interviews – from artists in exile – provide an in-depth, textured account of the lasting effect of censorship on artistic expression and the limits that these individuals are driven to, causing them to abandon their lives in Iran. It should be noted, however, that the views represented in this report are those of the specific individuals only and cannot be treated as representative of society as a whole. While there are most certainly those in Iran whose views match those stated here, it is important to remember that there will also be countless others which do not. The thoughts of many of those living in exile have been affected, often by persecutory experiences in their home country, the impact of which renders their views qualitatively different from those who have continued to live in Iran.

Material and sources related to the different art forms in Iran, with the exception of cinema, which has a vast body of work devoted to it, have been difficult to locate. Furthermore, with a political climate continually in flux, regulations regarding censorship become somewhat rapidly outdated.

ARTICLE 19 and the author are extremely grateful to the many individuals who spoke of their personal experiences; they have enriched this report tremendously. A list of all of the interviewees can be found at the end of the report.

September 2006

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ISBN 1-902598-84-9

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1. FOREWARD

Freedom of expression, including access to information, is a fundamental human right. The full enjoyment of this right is central to achieving individual freedoms and to developing democracy. It not only plays a critical role in tackling the underlying causes of poverty but is also the most potent force for the strengthening of peace and the preemption of conflict. Once freedom of expression is lost, all other freedoms fall.

Freedom of expression means that every individual has the right to hold opinions and to express them without fear. It includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any medium of choice, regardless of national frontiers or state boundaries. Censorship encompasses all interferences with these basic rights. Historically, artists have been the primary targets of the censor – novelists, playwrights, satirists, poets, painters and sculptors have seen their art banned, burned, desecrated, or destroyed while they themselves have been imprisoned, dismissed or killed. Over the last two centuries or so, the media has become the key vehicle of communication and expression, and its ability to function independently, is vital to freedom of expression. But alongside journalists, artists continue to be the censor’s primary concern – be it a state institution mandated to protect state interests, the “good morals” of society, or a community incensed by the artist’s portrayal of its inner workings.

This report on censorship of the Art in Iran is the first of what ARTICLE 19 expects to be a series of reports on freedom of expression related to the arts, interpreted broadly to cover film, visual art, theatre, literature, poetry, music and dance. It draws together personal accounts of artists’ experiences of censorship in Iran, with a rich array of secondary-source commentary on the nature and rationale of the restrictions which they face. In this way, the report seeks to illustrate the manner in which artistic censorship in Iran is both shaped and shapes; to demonstrate where the focus of the conflict lies between the Islamic Republic of Iran and individual expression.

The direct censorship instruments at the State’s disposal are blunt and wide-ranging: these include highly repressive **laws**, supported by an array of **regulations and guidelines** that delineate and restrict *what* can be expressed, and *how* it should be done, assisted by a multitude of censors – diverse **institutions** that will intervene at different stages of the artistic process by assenting to or denying the much needed authorisation.

ARTICLE 19’s work over the last twenty years has shown that control over an individual’s right to expression can be pursued through a range of means, both direct and indirect, thus making censorship particularly complex, as well as difficult to confront and defeat¹. This dimension of censorship is certainly true in Iran, where non-state, but no less powerful actors and instruments, exercise censorship over the arts. In the event that the government censorship apparatus presents some small cracks through which “controversial” expressions may be let free, **vigilante groups** intervene, self-mandated to protect society against “damaging influences” including through the use of force, threats and intimidations. Most powerful, however, is the **culture of censorship** within Iranian society that has blurred the line between what is imposed by the State and what has become inherent to society itself.

¹ Kevin Boyle, “Introduction”, *ARTICLE 19 1988 World Report, Information, Freedom and Censorship*, 1988

This has resulted in the powerful exercise of **social censorship**, as well as **self-censorship** of and by the artist. With a political climate continually in flux, regulations regarding censorship vary a great deal in their implementation or else become swiftly obsolete, resulting in a hugely schizophrenic environment for the artists. In more ways than one, censorship in Iran is the extension of physical power into the realm of the mind and the spirit.

By unveiling the mechanisms through which censorship is exercised in Iran, this report draws attention to its role in the attainment, preservation or continuance of power in the country. But the report also highlights Iran as a home to one of the richest artistic and cultural heritages in the world, shaped by the diverse cultures that have flourished in the past.

At a time of increasing global tension, above all between a number of Western governments and the Iranian authorities, at a time when Islamophobia, and anti-Western intolerance are growing, it is opportune to remind us all of our common artistic patrimony and common humanity, never expressed more significantly than through the protection and fulfilment of human rights.

Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director
25 September 2006

2. INTRODUCTION

*'In Iran there is freedom of expression.
It is freedom after expression that does not exist'*

Hadi Khorsandi²

In 1979, a revolution transformed Iran from a Constitutional monarchy to a theocratic Republic based on *Sharia* or Islamic law, under the rule of its founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The preceding government, under the leadership of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, had been characterised by a dualism both progressive and repressive in its nature. Although the Shah utilised Iran's vast oil revenues to modernise the country and imported Western values, such as women's suffrage, corruption in his inner circle and his own increasingly autocratic rule, including use of a brutal secret police force to silence dissent, eventually led to a polarisation between the oil-rich elite and the disaffected masses. In this manner, Iran became fertile ground for revolution.

Integral to the seeds of Islamic ideology that were sown following the launch of the Islamic Republic, was that the *ancien regime* must be rejected in all its forms and a new cultural milieu, in line with Islamic principles, be planted in its stead. 'The road to reform in a country,' pronounced Ayatollah Khomeini, 'goes through its culture, so one has to start with cultural reform.'³ The Islamic Cultural Revolution sought to purge the country of its Western 'pollution'. Above all, Western ideals, such as secularism and individualism, which the Shah had so whole-heartedly embraced, were to be crushed and supplanted by more traditional, Islamic values. Universities were closed down for two years and the arts were forced into an ideological straitjacket, codified by the Islamic principles of *halal* (allowed in Islam) and *haram* (forbidden in Islam).⁴

Unique to this new system of governance, which Constitutionally entrenched the nation's right to a democratically elected president and parliament, was the institution of a popularly unelected *Velayat-i Faqi* or Supreme Leader - the highest-ranking official in the Islamic Republic, who as God's representative on earth, was bestowed with the divine and unconditional authority to rule over the nation. As the chief guardian of morality, the Supreme Leader was declared responsible for steering a population, prone to stray, back onto the path of righteousness. In the words of Ayatollah Khomeini himself, who established this role:

[M]en would not be able to keep their ordained path and to enact God's laws unless a trustworthy and protective individual (or power) were appointed over them with responsibility for this matter, to prevent them from stepping outside the sphere of the licit and transgressing against the rights of others.⁵

² This quote is from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and has been translated by the author.

³ A Youssefzadeh, 'The Situation of Music in Iran since the Revolution: The Role of Official Organisations', 9 *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* (2000), 37.

⁴ R Tapper, 'Introduction', in R Tapper (ed.), *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London: I B Tauris, 2002), 6.

⁵ S Bahar, S Fellow Silberberg & C G Brown, *Guardians of Thought: Limits of Freedom of Expression in Iran* (Human Rights Watch, 1993), 10.

According to Iran's 1979 Constitution, the Supreme Leader, currently Ali Khomeini, is further responsible for appointing the head of the judiciary, six of the twelve clergy members on the Council of Guardians, the commanders of all the armed forces, Friday prayer leaders and the head of radio and television. He also has the final ruling on the President's election. Censorship in Iran can be perceived as ultimately having its roots in this paternalistic model of governance.

Consequently, under the guidance of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, a new culture, rooted in Islam, began to take shape. In two seminal pre-revolutionary works, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote that expressions of Westernisation, such as theatre and dancing, 'rape the youth of our country and stifle in them the spirit of virtue and bravery'.⁶ Such pre-revolutionary declarations, which Ayatollah Khomeini sought to implement upon the commencement of the Islamic Republic, led to the elimination of dance as an art form altogether, while others such as music, theatre, cinema and literature were in June 1980, all required to submit to the watchful eyes and firm hand of censorship of the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council (SCRC). Although not enshrined within the Constitution, as all other major state institutions are, Ayatollah Khomeini decreed the SCRC to be the highest body for producing guidelines and making decisions in relation to all cultural, educational and research activities. Its members are appointed by the Supreme Leader.

Within the SCRC is the rather Orwellianly-entitled Ministry of Culture and Information Guidance (MCIG), an elaborate system of councils that regulate and monitor every sphere of artistic expression. The term 'artistic licence' in Iran has consequently assumed an altogether different meaning – in order to exhibit art or photographic work, take photographs in the public domain for journalistic or artistic purposes, shoot a film, publish literature, produce a play, release an album or hold a concert, permission must first be obtained from the MCIG. Authorization can take weeks, months, years, or it can be denied altogether.

Every facet of each art form must be inspected by numerous different bodies within the MCIG, thus prolonging the licensing process even further. Art is subjected to a thorough examination as it is scrutinised and often torn limb from limb. The artist is informed of any amendments needed to make the work acceptable, that is, in line with the tenets espoused by Islam, in order to obtain a stamp of approval. Censorship, needless to say, is firmly entrenched, as is its corollary, self-censorship.

It is interesting to note that in Iran, it is not necessarily possible to separate these two words as decades of censorship, both during the Shah's reign and after the revolution, have firmly implanted a culture of censorship within Iranian society and blurred the line between what is imposed by the state and what has become inherent. Article 8 of the Iranian Constitution refers to this concept of reciprocity:

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Community Principle is a universal and reciprocal duty that must be fulfilled by the people with respect to one another, by the government with respect to the people, and by the people with respect to the government ... (This is in accordance with the Koranic verse: "*The believers, men and women, are guardians of one another; they enjoin the good and forbid the evil.*" [9:71])⁷

⁶ H Naficy, 'Islamicising Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update', in R Tapper (ed.), *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London: I B Tauris, 2002), 27.

⁷ 'Iranian Constitution', Article 8, translated in A Tschentscher (ed.), (Last modified January 2004), <http://www.oefre.unibe.ch/law/icl/ir00000.html>

This is a particularly troubling trait of censorship in Iran, as self-censorship significantly extends the boundaries of State-imposed censorship and passes under the official radar of what is an acceptable restriction on expression. When such self-censorship is ingrained within a society, this becomes particularly dangerous. Silencing any expression which challenges commonly-held beliefs stifles any diversity within a community, often to the detriment of the least-powerful members.

In the past, this has often led to extrajudicial ‘public prosecution’⁸ in the form of violence from vigilante groups, who strike without fear of reproach. These groups, which consist of the *Basij* and the *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, form part of the state’s tacit, but all too real, iron fist. In June 1993, after 60 *Hezbollahis* attacked a magazine, a spokesperson for the MCIG declared, ‘We cannot stop them, but we also do not approve of their attitude and behaviour’, before adding, ‘but our publications should behave in a way not to offend the sentiments of the *Hezbollahis*.’⁹ In this manner, these groups are implicitly condoned for taking action which the state does not wish to be directly accountable for.

The *Basij* are a paramilitary force which belongs to Iran’s ‘Parallel institutions’. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), they are the ‘the quasi-official organs of repression that have become increasingly open in crushing student protests, detaining activists, writers, and journalists in secret prisons, and threatening pro-democracy speakers and audiences at public events.’¹⁰

Likewise, the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* or ‘Party of God’, are an ultraconservative Islamist group (not to be confused with the Lebanese *Hezbollah*), often summoned to incite or restrain riots before the police force arrives to resolve matters in a more traditional manner. By this time, the *Hezbollahis* have usually slipped away. With clear reference to these two groups, the cleric Ayatollah Taheri, spoke to the BBC in 2002 of the ‘louts and fascists, who are a mixture of ignorance and madness, but whose umbilical cord is connected to the centre of power, and who are completely uncontrolled and beyond the law.’¹¹

A further tool used in the intimidation of individuals who have offended government sensibilities, is the state-controlled media, widely acknowledged as a conduit for the spread of propaganda. This frequently exploited avenue is used to besmirch journalists, intellectuals and artists that the state wishes to discredit, by labelling them as servants of imperialism, communists and agents of SAVAK (the secret police during the Shah’s reign).

Iran’s multi-layered, intricate system of censorship and harassment has rendered the situation insufferable for countless artists, many of whom have been forced to flee the country. For most artists, the nature of art is such that it cannot be dictated to; repression only serves to stifle creativity. Censorship, in the words of one writer, strangles the ‘very soul of a culture’.¹²

But there is an alternative argument and nor is it an uncommon one either. Many contend that art under censorship, in fact, flourishes. At the heart of this contentious belief, lies the conviction that censorship forces artists to delve deep into their creative springs and conceive of innovative methods with which to think outside of the box. One proponent of

⁸ Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 2.

⁹ *Ibid.* 6.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, ‘Iran – Human Rights Overview’, (January 2005), <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/13/iran9803.htm>

¹¹ J Muir, ‘Cleric Denounces Iran Chaos’, *BBC News*, (10 July 2002), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2119775.stm

¹² M Korpe, ‘Introduction’, M Korpe (ed.), *Shoot the Singer!: Music Censorship Today* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 1.

this argument, Gilles Jacob, director of the Cannes Film Festival, publicly stated in 2005 that:

Artistic revolution often takes place in those countries weighed down by restrictions, where artists are not free. Art is often born from constraint. On the other hand, when liberty is rediscovered, there is sometimes a diminution in quality because choice becomes immense, posing new problems.¹³

This line of thought is controversial because inherent in its reasoning is the notion of condoning the denial of fundamental human rights. It is a glorification of the suffering of others by those in a, usually, more privileged position. Its acceptance and, indeed celebration of the extreme hardship endured by artists in a repressive regime, is unpalatable to many, particularly human rights organisations. Central to any discussion of the creativity that emerges under censorship should be an emphasis on its innately repressive logic. It is demeaning to all artists to suggest that it is censorship that makes their work shine. 'I think romanticising censorship is a great disservice to Iranian artists,' says Maziar Bahari, a documentary-maker from Tehran. 'Censorship has had a negative effect on Iranian arts for centuries. I believe without censorship we would have many other great artists and film-makers whose talent and effort cannot bear fruit because of governmental, religious and social restrictions.'¹⁴

Ultimately censorship, which is disproportionate and unjustified, is a violation of the universal right to freedom of expression, a fundamental right that is recognised to lie at the heart of the protection of human dignity.

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed under several international human rights instruments, most notably Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* on Human Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the UDHR stipulates:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the right to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.¹⁵

Although the UDHR is not a directly binding charter, many parts of it, including Article 19 have acquired legal weight as regular international law since its implementation in 1948.

The first two subsections of Article 19 of the ICCPR further states:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of opinion.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of his choice.¹⁶

¹³ S Jeffries, 'Landscapes of the Mind', *The Guardian*, (16 April 2005), <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1460813,00.html>.

¹⁴ D de Luce, 'They want us to emigrate', (10 June 2004), <http://www.countercurrents.org/arts-lyuce100604.htm>.

¹⁵ Article 19, Memorandum on Media Regulation on the Islamic Republic of Iran, (London: 2006), 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 4.

Iran signed the ICCPR on 4 April 1968 and ratified it on 24 June 1975. As a signatory, Iran has thus undertaken a legal obligation to respect and promote the right to freedom as specified in the ICCPR.

It is, however, important to emphasise that the right to free expression is not an absolute right. It must be balanced against the need to protect other legitimate interests, which are exhaustively outlined in Article 19 (3) of the ICCPR:

The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

- a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
- b) For the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.¹⁷

As delineated in this Article, restrictions may be imposed on expression in very narrowly defined circumstances. International law has given greater illumination to this test: the restriction must be provided by law, with a specific degree of clarity and accessibility; vague government directives will not suffice. Furthermore, the restriction must be for the protection of a legitimate interest as outlined by Article 19 (3) and must be the least restrictive measure available.

In the past, Iran has overstepped the justification for protecting national security in order to imprison artists and deflect international objection. The most common explanation propounded by the Iranian government when expression has been curtailed, is that the expression is deemed to be inconsistent with Islamic principles, which are in Iran, valued above all else. Article 4 of Iran's Constitution states:

All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulation, and the wise persons of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter.¹⁸

This does not automatically entail that free expression is incompatible with Islam, but that 'Islamic criteria' are, like all other religious beliefs, open to interpretation. And indeed, there exists in Iran a gamut of exegeses. Nevertheless, key governmental players since the revolution have tended towards a conservative understanding of Islamic tenets and one that is frequently at odds with the human rights enshrined in the UDHR and international law. During the 1985 session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), in response to allegations of human rights violations, the Iranian ambassador to the US said, 'We do not pretend to respect human rights principles because for us the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its covenants are not the criteria for judgement and decision...Our aim is to follow the principles of Islam.'¹⁹ For Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, human rights was 'nothing but a collection of mumbo-jumbo by disciples of Satan.'²⁰

It should be emphasised that these sentiments do not belong to all members either of the clergy or of Iranian society. Several clerics have protested against the state's union of

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁸ Tschentscher, note 7, Article 4.

¹⁹ T Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi books, 2002), 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.* at 171.

religion and politics in a marriage they consider to be an ‘unholy alliance’.²¹ Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, one of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution and regarded as one of the highest-ranking authorities in Shi’a Islam today, was put under house arrest from 1997 to 2003, for his outspokenness against the brutality of the regime. ‘These massacres,’ he wrote in a public letter, ‘are incompatible with Islam.’²² Another cleric, Ayatollah Taheri, resigned in 2002, after being the spiritual leader of Isfahan for 30 years. ‘When I remember the promises and pledges of the beginning of the revolution,’ he told the BBC, ‘I tremble like a willow thinking of my faith.’²³ For Ayatollah Taheri, the regime is both ‘an enemy of Islam and humanity’.²⁴

Also noteworthy is that Iran has, since the early 1980s when revolutionary zeal was at its peak, progressed significantly in terms of protecting human rights. The early revolutionary years will forever bear the stain of mass executions, torture and the imprisonment of thousands of Iranians. The years following this period have conversely been characterised by a gradual loosening of regulations and art has increasingly begun to free itself from the grip of the state, as artists continue to test and push the boundaries. Development has undoubtedly been slow, but steady as well.

Yet art, like all other facets of life in Iran is vulnerable to the ever-changing currents of Iranian politics and recurrent waves of repression. Political factions, crudely categorised as the reformists and the conservatives, remain continually locked in battle, as each vies for power. The tension between these divisions is so great that it has been described by filmmaker Tamineh Milani as akin to a ‘dragon with two heads’.²⁵

Although there is vast diversity within each camp, the conservatives, who follow Ayatollah Khomeini’s teachings almost to the letter, promulgate a puritanical understanding of Islamic principles, which confines artistic expression to the cause of state propaganda, or at the most, tepid manifestations, such as paintings of flowers. Reformists interpret these precepts in a more liberal fashion. The word reform, it should be noted, is in the context of Iran a relative concept and reformists tend not to be liberal in the Western sense. They are still deeply religious and the roots of their beliefs lie in Islam rather than secular thought.

Iran’s reform movement was galvanised in 1997, when Mohammad Khatami was elected the first reformist president in a stunning landslide victory, with an approximate 80 per cent turn out.²⁶ His focus on democracy and dialogue between civilisations earned him many followers, who have since become known as the 2nd of Khordad Front. Mr Khatami’s Presidency, which was optimistically referred to as the ‘Tehran Spring’, was accompanied by a liberalisation in all domains. During this period, political debate was relatively unbridled, revolutionary dogma was more openly challenged and the nation was able to demand greater intellectual and artistic freedoms with less fear of punishment.

Unfortunately, after two presidential terms, during which time Mr Khatami’s attempts at reform were continually undermined by hardliners, many began to feel that although the President was in office, he was not in power. His failure to confront conservatives eventually cost him his popular support. For many, Mr Khatami was, ‘merely putting a civilised face on an uncivilised regime in order to prolong its existence’.²⁷

²¹ N Alavi, *We Are Iran* (London: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 324.

²² *Ibid.* at 106.

²³ Muir, note 11.

²⁴ Alavi, note 21 above at 110.

²⁵ S Ross, ‘Thorn in their Side’, *The Guardian*, (2 November 2001), <http://film.guardian.co.uk/censorship/news/0,,661797,00.html>.

²⁶ Alavi, note 20 above at 295.

²⁷ N Sohrabi, ‘Conservatives, Neoconservatives and Reformists: Iran after the Election of Mahmud

Although the President is officially the second highest ranking official in Iran and has a high public profile, his authority is curtailed by the multiple layers of power above him, in particular, by the Supreme Leader and the Council of Guardians. The Council of Guardians, an exceptionally powerful body, is responsible for overseeing the activities of parliament and determining which candidates are qualified to run both for presidential and parliamentary elections. Six members of the Council are appointed by the Supreme Leader and the head of the judiciary (himself elected by the Supreme Leader) recommends the remaining six.

The Council of Guardians is further vested with the authority to interpret the Constitution and decide if the laws passed by Parliament are consistent with *Sharia* law. It has effective power of veto over Parliament and in the past has rejected up to 40 per cent of the laws passed by them.²⁸

In the 2000 parliamentary elections, reformist candidates won nearly three-quarters of the seats, but its attempts to pass more than 100 progressive laws, such as a ban on torture, a Free Press Bill and legislation to raise the legal age for marriage (currently nine), were all vetoed by the Guardian Council.²⁹ In 2004, 2000 pro-reform candidates were banned from the parliamentary elections, thus allowing the conservatives to consolidate their rule.³⁰ At times, the Council has also dramatically winnowed the field of candidates running for presidency such as in the 1997 presidential election, when only four out of the 200 declared candidates were allowed to stand.³¹

This ebb and flow of power between the conservatives and reformists has led to uncertain bounds of censorship, which have profoundly affected all artistic endeavours. Hazy worded restrictions lie on unsteady ground and are less or more energetically enforced depending on who is wielding power at any particular moment in time. What may be legitimate at one point, may not remain so for very long.

In an interview with ARTICLE 19, well-known Iranian journalist Massoud Behnoud refers to these ever-shifting boundaries as similar to 'walking in a minefield'. 'Depending on where we put our feet,' he says, 'there is the danger of stepping on a mine.'³² Similarly in her autobiographical novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi describes the volatility of life in the Islamic Republic, which was as 'capricious as the month of April, when short periods of sunshine would suddenly give way to showers and storms. It was unpredictable: the regime would go through cycles of some tolerance, followed by a crackdown.'³³

And so in this manner, the era of reform under President Khatami came to an end and in its place, a far more conservative government was ushered in. In August 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad burst onto the political scene from relative obscurity and was voted President on the premise of reverting to ultraconservative principles, after eight years of reformist rule of limited effect. During his presidential campaign, he vowed to tackle what he referred to as a Western cultural invasion and instead promote Islamic values. Many reformists have since denounced the election as neither free nor fair, believing it to have been rigged by hardliners.

For such conservatives, who hold privileged positions within the Islamic Republic, fear of cultural change, often catalysed through art, is pervasive. But try as it might to implement

Ahmadinejad', April 2006,

<http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/crown/publications/Mid%20East%20Brief/Brief%204%20April%202006.pdf>

²⁸ 'The Structure of Power in Iran', PBS,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/tehran/inside/govt.html>.

²⁹ Alavi, note 21 above at 299.

³⁰ *Ibid.* at 10.

³¹ *Ibid.* at 295.

³² This quote is from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and has been translated by the author.

³³ A Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (London: Random House, 2003), 9.

a more belligerent tone, the regime is facing a youthful and an ethnically diverse nation that is becoming increasingly harder to suppress. A string of ethnic uprisings over the course of the past year, induced in part by the election of President Ahmadinejad, is testament to the fever of unrest that is spreading far and wide. Iran's ethnic groups, which constitute approximately 50 per cent of the population, are mutinying against a state that has persecuted them and endeavoured to enforce a strict regime of Persianisation upon their miscellaneous cultures for the past 27 years.

In a country where 70 per cent of the population is under 30 and who are, due to the education policies of the regime, remarkably well-educated, the voice of dissent is proving ever more difficult to gag. Iran's 90 per cent literacy rate, even in rural areas, has paradoxically led to an erudite youth who wish to, but are restrained from, expressing themselves freely.³⁴

Interestingly, women have played a huge part in changing the social dynamic in Iran. After living in the shadow of men for decades, today, there are more female graduates from Iranian universities than male; a change that promises to bring with it profound social change.³⁵ Although Iran is a long way from reform, as gender discrimination remains deeply embedded within the social fabric, for human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi, women will in the long run be responsible for transforming Iran.³⁶ Indeed, after visiting Iran in 2002, Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and sociologist, proclaimed, 'Do these heads contain a powder keg that the regime of the old Ayatollahs has to fear more than anything else?'³⁷

Life in Iran has consequently been transformed into a cat and mouse game, as authorities periodically clampdown on the public, while they in turn continue to explore new avenues both for expression and information. Accordingly, Iranians have access to much of what is censored and banned, through the black-market, satellite television and the Internet. An influx of bootleg films and CDs are readily available to all those living in Iran. Satellite television has proven to be a particularly huge problem for the authorities and in 1994, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Araki issued a *fatwa* (Islamic edict) banning all satellite television. He declared that: 'Installing satellite antennae, which open Islamic society to the inroads of decadent foreign culture and the spread of ruinous Western diseases to Muslims is *haram*.'³⁸

The government urged the public to surrender their dishes voluntarily and threatened fines up to US\$750 for those who were found with dishes in their possession. Those found importing, selling or installing dishes faced even heftier fines of US\$25,000 and possible jail sentences.³⁹ The ban, however, was futile and instead forced Iranians to be resourceful with their dishes, by camouflaging them or buying smaller apparatus. Even so, the government continues to persevere with its periodic clampdowns. One Tehran resident told ARTICLE 19:⁴⁰

Since Ahmadinejad has come to power there has been an increase in the blocking of satellite channels in Iran. When he was first elected he announced that all satellite dishes would be seized, but such as move is yet to occur. This is typical in Tehran – the authorities decide to launch a campaign against the possession of satellite dishes,

³⁴ Alavi, note 21 at 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 10.

³⁶ S Ebadi, *Iran Awakening*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 108.

³⁷ Alavi, note 21 above at 14.

³⁸ Naficy, note 6 above at 54.

³⁹ *Ibid.* at 55.

⁴⁰ This quote is from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and has been translated by the author.

everybody hides their dishes, the state confiscates as many as it can, then after a few days, the remaining dishes come out of hiding.

The Internet has proven to be a particularly powerful tool in the liberation of expression, especially in light of recent events, such as the intense assault on the print media. The past few years in Iran have borne witness to the closure of more than 100 publications and the arrest and imprisonment of scores of journalists.⁴¹ According to a HRW report in 2005, the number of Internet users in Iran has increased at an average annual rate of more than 600 percent for the past four years; a figure unparalleled in the Middle East.⁴² Farsi is now the fourth most frequent language used for keeping weblogs in the world and it is estimated that there are more than 75,000 blogs in Farsi.⁴³

So formidable is the 'Internet Revolution' in Iran that it has been compared to a 'Trojan horse carrying enemy soldiers in its belly,' by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the leader of the Guardian Council.⁴⁴ Cognisant of its power and scope, on 20 April 2003, Iran became the first country ever to imprison a blogger – Sina Motallebi was arrested for 'undermining national security through artistic activity'.⁴⁵ Although the government has continued to do its utmost to prevent this movement from progressing, the Internet as an arena where free expression is able to flourish is so far proving to be unconquerable.

The seeds of dissent and rebellion, although present in Iran, require sustenance and support so that they may one day mature, allowing artists to be able to express themselves without the fear of repression.

3. VISUAL ART

The cultural pogrom that accompanied the 1979 revolution in Iran rapidly brought artistic activities to a grinding halt. Art courses terminated with the closure of universities and the doors of art galleries were barred and bolted for almost a decade. Foreign art was banished to basements where it was left to gather dust for many years. Artistic expression during this period was further overwhelmed by the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and appropriated by the State which commissioned artists to churn out murals and posters glorifying religious devotion, depicting spiritual leaders and promoting martyrdom and heroism.⁴⁶ Alongside this militant-religious iconography, an interest in innocuous art forms such as calligraphy and paintings of landscapes, and still lifes was revived. Innovation, at least in the public domain, was nonexistent.

The death of millions and the trials of war, however, produced a generation of Iranians who, frustrated and disillusioned, turned to art in the hope of finding both solace and a language in which to express themselves. Exploring the realms of photography and film, two relatively new media in Iran, artists have gradually been able to excel and gain international recognition for their endeavours. With more established art forms such as

⁴¹ Alavi, note 21 above at 2.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, 'Regional Overview', *False Freedom: Online Censorship in the Middle East and North Africa*, (November 2005), http://hrw.org/reports/2005/mena1105/2.htm#_Toc119125694.

⁴³ N Alavi, 'Freedom in Farsi Blogs', 20 December 2004, *The Guardian*, <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/weblogs/story/0,,1377538,00.html>.

⁴⁴ Alavi, note 21 above at 265.

⁴⁵ Reporters without Borders, 'Iran', *Internet under Surveillance*, (2004), http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733.

⁴⁶ R Issa, R Pakbaz & D Shayegan, *Iranian Contemporary Art*, (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001), 13.

painting and sculpture, progress has been sluggish, although more recent years have been coloured by a renewed burst of activity and innovation. Sculpture, one of the most afflicted of the Cultural Revolution's casualties, suffered significantly. It was prohibited for a great many years and even after its ban was revoked, human and animal forms were still strongly discouraged.

According to artist Soudabeh Ardavan, this change in attitude is typical of the government who in the past also declared chess as *haram* along with sculpture, before deciding years later that they were perhaps *halal* after all.⁴⁷ For Ms Ardavan, the Cultural Revolution was an ironically entitled travesty, which served to 'destroy' rather than cultivate culture in the country. Imprisoned in 1981 for eight years, for her pro-democracy activities at university, she continued to sketch on scraps of paper, which were later smuggled out into Iran by those visiting her. Following her release from prison, Ms Ardavan worked as an illustrator for five years before resolving to leave Iran, where she felt as if her 'drawing was dictation'.

Depictions of women were a particular difficulty she recalls. As an artist in Iran, her drawings of rocks had once been prohibited by the MCIG for resembling the female form. On another occasion, when working in a gallery which had displayed pictures of women (wearing the *hejab*) in its window, she received a visit from the local paramilitaries. 'The *Hezbollahis* would come and tell us to remove the pictures,' she says, 'they didn't like us showing images of women ... they used to threaten to break the window.' But for Ms Ardavan, there is ample scope for optimism. 'Things are changing in Iran,' she says, 'because of our women who refuse to accept things the way they are.'

Maryam Hashemi, an artist whose most current work focuses on women and the *hejab*, is the archetypal defiant Iranian female to whom Ms Ardavan is referring. 'Visually, I find it [*hejab*] amusing,' she says, 'It's a big barrier. It limits, but I'm attracted to it as well.' For Ms Hashemi, the *hejab* is symbolic of the separation between the interior and exterior worlds that exists in all realms of life in Iran. 'Indoors and outdoors are two extremes,' she says. 'You step out of your house wearing the *hejab* and you step out into a different world and act in a different way.' 'You have to put a mask on,' she adds. Once outside, 'You can't laugh out loud, you can't hold your boyfriend's hand or even ask someone in the street for directions.' The inside world, is in contrast, she says, not dissimilar to the West. This separation between the private and public spheres is indeed so pronounced that 'experiencing the two worlds' is for Ms Hashemi, 'surreal'.

In Iran, Ms Hashemi was always perceived as rebellious to those who knew her, not only for her behaviour, but also the art in her private collection, which consisted mainly of nudes, often very pornographic – an anathema in Islam. Her bedroom walls were covered in paintings of nudes and she even made pornographic, Islamic greeting cards. By depicting such controversial subject matter, Ms Hashemi risked punishment if her work was discovered by the authorities. For this reason, her personal artwork remained strictly within the boundaries of her home. The art Ms Hashemi exhibited to the outside world was considerably tamer. She admits that her art in Iran was, due to the numerous restrictions, 'much more outrageous' than it has been since her move to the UK in 2002.

When living in Tehran, Ms Hashemi had three exhibitions, which she assigns to the fact that President Khatami was in power. She reflects that during Mr Khatami's Presidency, 'there wasn't really any more freedom, it was just easier.' Her paintings in these exhibitions were much more abstract than those in her private collection, a characteristic common to

⁴⁷ Soudabeh Ardavan's quotes are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

much contemporary art in Iran. 'If you want to express yourself, you can't just do it,' says Ms Hashemi, 'you have to follow the rules.' These rules she elaborates obviously preclude nudity but also any hint of the political. 'You do have to censor yourself,' she admits so that you don't include anything that might be considered offensive. 'If I had a message, it would have to be quite hidden,' she adds.

In spite of, but not in glorification of these restrictions, she concedes that censorship did give art a certain 'richness'. 'Because of all the barriers,' she says, 'it actually makes it better ... because you have to be clever ... if you do it cleverly enough, it's all hidden like a code.' Interestingly, Ms Hashemi adds that self-censorship takes place in Iran not solely because of the government, but because of societal attitudes at large. 'The government has done a good job with the people,' she says, 'It's like 1984. Society is watching you. They've made spies out of the people.'

For Saeed Siadat, now living in Los Angeles, life as an artist in Iran was very similar to Ms Hashemi's. 'In Iran, I was working as a graphic designer and illustrator,' he says, 'and did my painting in private.'⁴⁸ 'Most artists,' he adds, 'worked in private, no matter what their subject was. We knew the censorship rules and regulations and tried not to make any mistakes.'⁴⁹ Mr Siadat recalls that as art was under the control of the government, the only artists exhibited were those who had regime support. 'Other artists,' he says, 'developed a symbolic language, but the regime learned the symbolism too. Artists tried not to be caught and the regime tried to catch them, turning the creative process into a cat and mouse game.'⁵⁰

At first glance, Tehran-based photographer Shadi Ghadirian's work, like Ms Hashemi's, also seems to focus on the *hejab* (Muslim women's dress). One particularly notable body of work consists of a series of women wearing a type of *hejab*, known as the *chador* (one piece cloth covering head-to-toe), with various household items, a grater, an iron or a teacup and saucer, concealing their faces. 'For some women household work becomes a job, it becomes so daily, so routine that they become like computers,' she says.⁵¹ 'There's no creation in their sweeping and so they no longer see their faces. And so, for a woman who is sweeping each day, she becomes no different than her broom.'

For an outsider, especially those living in the West, the *chador* is prominent; it appears to symbolise the suppression of women in Iran. For Ms Ghadirian, this quite simply is not the case. 'When I show women in *hejab*, I am lying because women don't wear the *hejab* at home,' she says. 'When women are washing their clothes,' she continues, 'they don't wear *hejab* or the *chador* ... In the West, they always think my main theme is the *chador* ... what they don't realise is that if we want to exhibit, we have to use the *hejab*.' The use of this garment is not then representative of female oppression in Iran, but a sign of the boundaries within which artists must manoeuvre, especially those whose work focuses on women.

One of these restrictions, Ms Ghadirian admits, is self-censorship. 'Even if no one tells me that I should not display certain photos,' she says, 'but I go ahead and have an exhibition, which is against the values of the Islamic Republic, this exhibition will be closed down and I will be in a lot of trouble.'

For Ms Ghadirian, who works in a studio, photography is a relatively easy process. Authorisation is not required from the MCIG for photography in the private sphere; work which is deemed inappropriate, will simply be denied an exhibition permit. Photographing in

⁴⁸ C Lonberger, 'A Unique Vision', <http://www.artbysaeed.com/review2.htm>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Shadi Ghadirian's quotes are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

the public domain is not so straightforward, as photographers can potentially document situations, which the state would prefer to overlook.

For established photojournalist Nader Davoodi, life as a photographer in Iran is also reasonably clear-cut. With a photojournalist's card, provided by one of the many government-aligned press organisations, permission for photography does not need to be obtained from the MCIG. Subject matter must, however, still be chosen with caution. 'The feeling of freedom [for photojournalists] can be interpreted in two ways,' says Mr Davoodi.⁵² 'In one sense, if we are talking about the State and the laws being supportive, then this is not the case ... we still have a long way to go before we achieve this. But once you have a photographer's pass, then things really are much easier.' According to Mr Davoodi, after ten years, there is even the possibility of applying for an exclusive permit directly from the MCIG, which bestows yet greater freedom upon its holder.

The regulations for exhibition permits, both for painting and photography, are more or less rigorously enforced depending on which direction the pendulum of power has swung. During President Khatami's time, this prerequisite was abolished and the decision-making left to the discretion of the galleries. Not wanting to invoke the wrath either of the authorities or the public, this did nevertheless lead to a prudent selection of material, or in other words, self-censorship. Permits have, since President Ahmadinejad's election, become mandatory once again.

But a lack of clarity about how far restrictions are imposed upon society by the State, how far the culture itself imposes these restrictions and whether they would continue to do so in a more open society, arises once more. 'Even if the State doesn't restrict,' says Mr Davoodi, 'the culture does.' Interestingly, 'even outside of Iran,' he says, 'I censor myself.' Most photographers 'leave the country and still practice self-censorship as they do not know which photos will anger who.' 'It is only those who know that they will not be returning to Iran,' he adds, 'who take pictures and write freely.'

For London-based photographer and recent graduate Farah Ashtiani,⁵³ taking photographs in Iran has not proved to be so simple a task. Without a photojournalist's pass and wanting to take photos in the public domain, Ms Ashtiani was denied permission by the MCIG to photograph Afghan refugees for her final year project. The MCIG, she says, were deeply suspicious about allowing a foreign student to take photographs of such a controversial topic. 'They don't tend to give permission for such subject matters,' she says, 'because their [the Afghan refugees] situation is very bad and many want to return to Afghanistan.' Disregarding the MCIG's negative response, Ms Ashtiani photographed the Afghan refugees, but paid the price – her photographs were erased and she spent a night behind bars.

On another occasion, her photographs of Iranian youth during the holy month of *Moharram* were deleted by the authorities, as they showed images of youngsters gathered together and out all night, supposedly in the name of religion.

Shortly after, Ms Ashtiani began work with an NGO concerned with helping drug addicts and discovered that through her work, she was able to take photographs without permission from the MCIG. Before long, the world of drug addiction and harm reduction to which she was introduced became the new topic of her project. But Ms Ashtiani is adamant that even with a journalist's permit, there are certain subjects such as drug addiction, Afghan refugees or other equally contentious social issues that photographers quite simply cannot

⁵² Nader Davoodi's quotes are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

⁵³ This is a pseudonym created by the author to protect the interviewee's identity. All of the interviewees' quotes are from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

photograph. 'I think you would have to be very lucky [to obtain permission for such topics],' she says.

Living abroad, as Ms Ashtiani does, posed a particular threat to the MCIG. 'They get scared,' she says, 'because you might show your photos overseas and depict Iran in a way that they don't want you to.' 'If you take a photograph of these things and you live in Iran,' she continues, 'where are you going to show them?' Iran's elaborate censorship process, which she describes as a 'chain joined together' is not easily overcome. 'The first part of the chain,' she says, 'knows that if he is a bit slack, the next person in line will be a further obstacle.'

But for Ms Ashtiani, Iran is yet to face up to many of its social ills and until it does, photography, especially in the public sphere, will never be truly free. BBC journalist Sue Lloyd-Roberts certainly discovered this when she was deported in December 2003 for taking pictures of prostitutes in Iran. 'We are deporting you tomorrow morning because you have taken pictures of prostitutes. This is not a reflection of life in our Islamic Republic,' she was informed. 'We don't have prostitutes.'⁵⁴

In 2005, a collection of foreign art that had been banished to the basement of the Museum of Contemporary Art for being 'anti-Islamic', was rescued from its 25-year exile.⁵⁵ The 190 paintings, prints and drawings including works by Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec and Andy Warhol, which were part of Farah Pahlavi's (the Shah's wife) collection, were exhibited by the director of the art gallery, Reza Samiazar, as a final farewell after he was forced to resign by the hard-line regime of President Ahmadinejad. 'If it was difficult to promote art under the reformist government of Mr Khatami', he told the BBC, 'there was no chance it would work under the conservatives.'⁵⁶ The exhibition did of course not escape the attention of the *Basij*, who promptly removed a Francis Bacon painting depicting two men lying with their 'attendants'.⁵⁷

4. FILM

At the vanguard of world cinema stands Iranian film, celebrated around the globe for its cinematic poetry which skilfully weaves together a breathtaking tapestry of sensuous imagery, existential exploration and veiled political allegory. It is acknowledged as amongst the most innovative and inspiring filmmaking today, with Iranian filmmakers winning an ever-increasing number of awards at international film festivals with which to further furnish their already crowded mantelpieces. In 1995, at one of the opening nights of the 22nd Telluride Film Festival, Werner Herzog declared: 'What I say tonight will be a banality in the future. The greatest films of the world today are being made in Iran.'⁵⁸

Yet it would surprise most to discover that many of Iranian films shown in the West today are not available to those living in Iran – these films, regarded as morally unsuitable, are made for consumption by Western eyes only. Recognising the humane and artistic face that they present to the rest of the world – a welcome change to the usual images of

⁵⁴ Alavi, note 21 above at 156.

⁵⁵ 'First Show for Iran's Western Art', *BBC News*, 2 Sep 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4207612.stm>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ D Khazeni, 'Book Review', 35 *Bright Lights Film Journal* (2002), <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/35/iraniancinema.html>.

religiosity and repression – the Iranian government has long realised the merit of their export. Distinguished directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, the darling of film critics in the West and who, according to Martin Scorsese, ‘represents the highest level of artistry in the cinema,’ are not, however, held in such high esteem by Iranian clerics.⁵⁹ Mr Kiarostami’s films have not been shown in Iran for the past ten years. ‘I think they [the government] don’t understand my films,’ he says, ‘and so prevent them being shown just in case there is a message they don’t want to get out.’⁶⁰ His films have consecutively been banned for addressing taboo themes such as suicide, prostitution and divorce as well as for more temperate, philosophical ideas, deemed equally inappropriate by the state.

But Mr Kiarostami is not alone. Other eminent and internationally acclaimed directors, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi have endured a similar fate. Mr Makhmalbaf has had five of his films banned and Mr Panahi, every single one. One of Mr Makhmalbaf’s films, a *Time of Love* (1990), was banned for its portrayal of adultery without condemnation. The film, composed of three episodes, each with an alternative ending, explores the theme of moral relativism. It was precisely this non-judgemental approach which aroused the ire of the clergy. After viewing the film in the 1991 annual Fajr Film Festival held in Tehran, Ayatollah Jannati, the leader of the Guardian Council, was noted to have declared: ‘In the name of art, a creeping movement...has been started [which] is a serious threat to the Islamic Republic, to the committed artists, and to the revolution.’⁶¹ Films granted screening permission by the MCIG for the Fajr Film Festival, are often denied authorisation for general release, especially if they invoke the wrath of spectators at the festival.

Mr Panahi’s latest film *Offside* (2006), offended the sensibilities of censors for tackling the Iranian law that bans women from football stadiums. Even though the film scooped up an award at the Berlin International Film Festival, it received very little attention at Iran’s own film festival, the Fajr. Wanting to underplay the film, the MCIG, who organise the festival, gave *Offside* one of the worst screening times. Following the film’s international release, much to the surprise and delight of Iranian female football fans and Mr Panahi himself, President Ahmadinejad announced that he would repeal the law with which the film is concerned. His proclamation did not, however, come to fruition as it was promptly overruled by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

All of Mr Panahi’s films explore equally contentious and gritty social issues: *The White Balloon* (1995) relates the tale of a little girl who out to buy a goldfish is prey to a series of swindlers who attempt to part her from her money; *The Circle* (2000), examines the intertwined stories of several women, who are all in one way or another, victims of society; and *Crimson Gold* (2003), unflinchingly exposes the stark class divisions that exist within Iran. Following the completion of this last film, Mr Panahi was arrested. He told *The Guardian* that ‘[The ministry officials] think that anyone who is independent or not following their views is a spy of the west, spreading western propaganda.’⁶²

Considered to be one of Iran’s most uncompromising directors, Mr Panahi has earned himself a reputation for his humanistic, unsentimental portrayals of life in Iran. ‘When I come across a problem in society that pains me,’ says Mr Panahi, ‘it’s my responsibility to make a film to address the problem...I make films, first, for Iranians. This is their problem,

⁵⁹ Jeffries, note 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ S Siavoshi, ‘Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication’, *29 International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1997), 518.

⁶² Jeffries, note 13.

so I want to show it to them.’⁶³ Unfortunately, the work of artists such as Mr Panahi, admired and acclaimed around the world, is banned in their native land, unavailable to the very people for whom they are made. Not that this has discouraged Mr Panahi from making his films. ‘Evidently when you make a film, you primarily want to show it in your own country, where you made the film,’ he says, ‘but you should not be afraid of the people who try to stop or ban your film, because you start to censor yourself, and then it’s another film.’ ‘Sometimes,’ he adds, ‘self censorship is worse than actual censorship, so when I make a film I don’t think about what is allowed and not allowed.’⁶⁴

Like the other giants of Iranian cinema, Mr Panahi is, however, more fortunate than lesser known Iranian filmmakers. The international renown of these pre-eminent directors enables them to procure foreign investment with relative ease, while the majority of filmmakers remain dependant on the state for financial aid. This pecuniary reliance is, unsurprisingly, inextricably bound to a lack of autonomy and submission to censors.

Perhaps most surprising, however, is that films are being made in Iran at all. According to film critic Gönül Donmez-Colin, the Islamist Revolution was feared by many as ‘the death knell of cinema’.⁶⁵ Prior to the revolution, many clerics considered film to be *haram* and going to the cinema, a sin.⁶⁶ Cinema was associated with the Shah’s regime and film seen as an agent of western cultural imperialism. ‘It is the Shah who, in order to corrupt our youth has filled cinemas with colonial programmes and wants to bring up our girls and boys with unchastity and ignorant of the dreadful state of the country,’ announced Ayatollah Khomeini. ‘The Shah’s cinema,’ he continued, ‘is nothing but a centre of prostitution and the educator of self-ignorant puppets, ignorant of the disordered condition of the country. The Islamic nation considers these centres as being against the interests of the country.’⁶⁷

In the year before the republic was launched, cinema underwent a literal baptism of fire as the nation was purified of this ‘poison.’⁶⁸ Approximately 400 spectators were killed in a fire at Abadan’s Rex Cinema – the doors had been locked from the outside.⁶⁹ By January, when the new regime had been installed, 180 cinemas had been set alight nationwide.

Censorship during these early years was at an all time high. According to one report, during the first four years of the Islamic Republic, 513 out of 898 foreign films were banned and 1956 out of the 2208 domestically produced (both pre- and post-revolutionary) films were refused screening permits.⁷⁰ Another account states that in the first year, only 3 films were made and in the second year, 23, from which only 10 were shown.⁷¹

But the medium of film could not be ignored and before long the clergy were faced with two alternatives: they could either prohibit film as the Taliban had done in Afghanistan in 1996, or bring it under their own jurisdiction. Growing wise to its potential as a mouthpiece for propaganda, film was seen as a valuable instrument that could be used to

⁶³ J Farouky, ‘Blowing the Whistle,’ *Time Magazine*, (21 May 2006),

<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901060529-1196395,00.html>.

⁶⁴ N Dawson, ‘Jafar Panahi talks about Iranian cinema, Middle East politics and his latest film *Crimson Gold*’, *IndieWire*, http://www.indiewire.com/people/people_040109crimson.html.

⁶⁵ G Donmez-Colin, ‘Unveiling Islam: Women, Cinema, and Islam in Iran and Turkey’, <http://www.biff.com.au/general/libraryattachment.aspx?code=10>.

⁶⁶ Z Mir-Hosseini, ‘Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State’, *219 Middle East Report*, (2001), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer219/219_ziba-mir-hosseini.html.

⁶⁷ P Soltani, ‘The True Face of Women: A Missing Link in Iranian Cinema’, *Iran-Bulletin*, (October 1998), <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/art/PARVAN2.html>.

⁶⁸ Tapper, note 4 above at 27.

⁶⁹ Khazeni, note 57.

⁷⁰ Mostyn, note 19 above at 37.

⁷¹ Siavoshi, note 61 above at 515.

plant the seed of revolution firmly in the Iranian mind. Ayatollah Khomeini himself emphasised early on that it was not cinema that the state was opposed to per se, but its abuse:

We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television...The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to.

By subjecting film to a strict process of Islamicisation, it was soon shaped to fit the mould of Islamic principles. Content of early post-revolutionary films consisted mainly of summoning men to the frontline, extolling the virtues of *hejab* and promoting Islamic ideals.⁷² According to director Dariush Mehdizadeh, 'sex, song and dance were omitted,' and replaced by 'constant references to religious topics, to the oppression by masters, to the rebellion of the oppressed against cruelty and the fight against monarchic traditions.'⁷³

In one sense not much has changed. Film critic Hamid Naficy argues that in Iran, two cinemas have evolved side by side. One is the 'quality' or art house cinema, which critiques social conditions and is exported around the globe and the other is the 'populist' cinema, whose plot, themes, characterization and portrayal of women all subscribe to post-revolutionary values. It is the latter which the vast majority of Iranians are most likely to see.⁷⁴

Occasionally, when films made for the international market are considered to be partially suitable for domestic audiences, its undesirable elements are removed or modified, before it is deemed morally appropriate. In director Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's film *Nargess* for example, the solo female voice at the end is masked by a chorus of singers for Iranian filmgoers.⁷⁵ Endings of films are especially important to censors who regard unhappy endings as unacceptable, because of the disheartening influence that they exert on spectators – this, they worry, will undermine the revolutionary spirit.

And so, true to form, in order to ensure that all films adhere to Islamic ideals, they are scrutinised, dissected and often reassembled so that they are in accordance with this code of ethics. In order to obtain approval to shoot a film, filmmakers must contend with a labyrinthine maze of bureaucracy, running inevitably into many dead-ends along the way. The web of officialdom which all hopeful filmmakers face, consists of four film councils, all under the umbrella of the MCIG: the Council of Screenplay Inspection, which reviews a summary of the proposed screenplay for approval; the Council for Issuing a Production Permit, which reads the full text, vets a list of all cast and crew and determines whether the film can be produced; the Council of Film Reviewing, which decides whether it should issue a release permit and finally, the High Council of Deputies which reviews films that have not been issued permits.⁷⁶ These councils can at any point approve the script or film, require changes or prohibit them outright.

Apart from obvious anti-Islamic themes, for many years, the unwritten rules of censorship also meant that artistic boundaries remained ambiguous. This resulted in self-censorship, especially as filmmakers were keen to avoid being burdened with financial costs. Moreover, even when the government finally published official regulations for filmmakers in 1983, affairs became only somewhat less opaque, as the continued struggle between

⁷² Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 95.

⁷³ Mostyn, note 19 above at 37.

⁷⁴ H Naficy, 'Iranian Cinema under the Islamic Republic', 97 *American Anthropologist* (1995), 549.

⁷⁵ Solo female singers are banned in Iran – see Chapter on Music for a more comprehensive explanation.

⁷⁶ Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 29.

reformists and conservatives has meant that rules are more or less strictly observed at various points in time. The regulations printed in 1983 are as follows:⁷⁷

1. Islamic *hejab* must be obeyed at all times for women. This means: wearing loose long clothes and trousers in dark colours. Even scarves and *chadors* (a one-piece cloth covering head-to-toe) must be of dark colour. The hair and neck must be completely covered. Only the face and the hands to the wrist can be visible. When this not impossible, as when showing women in the previous [Shah's] time, a hat or wig can be used.
2. It is prohibited to show the made up face of a woman.
3. Close up of a woman's face is not allowed.
4. It is prohibited to show a variety of clothes throughout a film without a logical explanation.
5. All physical contact between men and women is prohibited.
6. The use of the *chador* for negative characters and persons must have a logical excuse.
7. Hair styles which show dependence or approval of loose and immoral political, cultural or intellectual groups inside and outside the country is not permitted.
8. The exchange of any joke, talk, conduct, or sign between a male and female individual in a film which suggest a departure from the behavioural purity acceptable to society is banned.
9. To use young girls is not allowed without permission of the Office of Supervision and Evaluation.
10. Words, signs or signals that directly or indirectly relate to sexual matters are prohibited.
11. The use of a tie, bow tie and anything that denotes foreign culture is not permitted.
12. Smoking a cigarette or pipe or the drinking of alcoholic beverages and the use of narcotic drugs is prohibited.
13. The use of music, which is similar to well-known internal or foreign songs, is not allowed.
14. Propaganda for doctrines that are illegal and counter to the Islamic order is banned.
15. *Sharia* laws and customs, religious beliefs and mandatory religious laws have to be followed and the religiously forbidden be avoided.

Since the release of these regulations, new versions have been published periodically. In 1993, the government issued a further list of regulations intended to establish an Islamic, anti-imperialist cinema.

Films will be rejected if they contain material which:⁷⁸

- Denies or weakens the principles of Islam.
- Subverts Islam by propagating superstition or sorcery.
- Insults director or indirectly God's messengers, the *Valiye-Faqih*, the leadership council or qualified *Mojtaheds* (those learned in Islamic law).
- Profanes the sanctities of Islam and of other religions recognized in the Constitution of the Islamic republic of Iran.
- Denies or weakens the highest qualities of humankind (the veil, the spirit of forgiveness, sacrifice, modesty...).
- Depicts or mentions situations that are against Islamic virtue (slander, use of tobacco products...).
- Propagates vile acts, corruption, prostitution and improper wearing of the veil.
- Educates on the topic of or encourages dangerous and injurious addictions and illicit professions such as smuggling.
- Depicts foreign culture, politics, economics or society in a misleading manner.

⁷⁷ Soltani, note 67.

⁷⁸ Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 30.

- States or presents any material that is against the interests of the country and can be exploited by foreigners.
- Expresses or depicts historic and geographic facts, and the internal problems of the country in an exaggerated way or in a manner that misleads the viewer and offends the principles of Islam.
- Depicts unpleasant sounds or scenes (including those caused by technical defects) that could jeopardise the viewer's health.
- Involves films with low artistic or technical value that could lead to a decline in the public's taste and sensibilities.

This was followed by yet another booklet in 1996, which forbade:⁷⁹

- Tight feminine clothes.
- Showing any part of a woman's body except the face and hands.
- Physical contact and tender words or jokes between men and women.
- Jokes on the army, police, or family.
- Negative characters with a beard (which could assimilate them with religious figures)
- Foreign or coarse words.
- Foreign music or any type of music which brings joy.
- Showing a favourable character who prefers solitude to collective life.
- Policemen and soldiers badly dressed or having a disagreement.

Yet the censorship of film in Iran is, predictably, a multi-layered affair. Aside from the various councils that filmmakers must contend with and the numerous, dogmatic regulations, films are subjected to a further stage of control as they are classified into three categories: A, B and C, depending, allegedly, on their technical quality and aesthetic excellence.⁸⁰ These groupings determine the access to media a film has and consequently, how it will be received by the marketplace. Those in category 'A', can advertise on state-controlled television, are shown at the most popular cinemas, at the best times and for a fixed period of time, while those in 'C', are refused promotion on television, released for a limited period and shown at off-peak times. This more subtle form of censorship can be used to financially break filmmakers, thus diminishing their future prospects.

In 1989, the MCIG underwent a relative process of liberalisation. Believing that Islamic values had been sufficiently inculcated in the minds of filmmakers and wanting to appear less restrictive, the first stage of censorship – script approval – was removed.⁸¹ This concession only led to self-censorship as filmmakers were reluctant to make films that would be rejected by censors at a later stage; this would be a financial millstone too great to bear. A few years later, in 1993, approval for scripts became mandatory once again. This flux reflects, once again, the continual struggle between Iran's reformists and its conservatives. At any one point, depending on which direction the scales of power have tipped, regulations can be more or less strictly enforced and the same film can be either permitted or banned.

This certainly was the case for director Barbod Taheri's documentary *The Fall of 57* (1980), which recorded the early days of the revolution. In 1984, four years after its release, the film was prohibited for dealing with topics that the authorities no longer wished to discuss. Mr Taheri was provided with the following explanation: 'There are moments in a

⁷⁹ 'Women and Iranian film', *Skidmore University*, <http://www.skidmore.edu/academics/arthistory/ah369/rules.htm>.

⁸⁰ Mostyn, note 19 above at 169. The information about this classification process has been taken from this page.

⁸¹ Naficy, note 6 above at 39.

nation's life when people no longer need to know what has actually happened.'⁸² If the film was to be re-released, many of the incriminating scenes, he was informed, would have to be removed.

Davud Mirbaqeri's film *Snowman* (1994/7) faced a similar fate when it was released under President Khatami, after being previously banned; testament to the disparity in reformist and conservative opinion in matters of the arts.⁸³ The film's protagonist is an Iranian man who dreams of travelling to the USA. In order to obtain a visa for his journey he travels to Istanbul (there is no American embassy in Iran), where his application is rejected. Desperate, he resorts to dressing up as a woman (without *hejab*) and attempts to seduce an American man into asking for his hand in marriage. The film broaches the taboos of transvestism, unveiled women and homosexuality and so, was naturally met with anger by hardliners following its release. Cinemas showing the film were promptly attacked by the *Ansar-e Hezbollah* causing it to be withdrawn.

The Lizard (2004), an amusing satirical piece that gently mocks the Islamic clergy, is another film that won praise from audiences but scorn from hardliners following its release. The film, one of the most popular in recent years, follows the capers of an escaped convict who dresses up as a cleric to avoid recognition and takes cover in a village while attempting to contact his shady associates in the criminal underworld. In the meantime, he is mistaken for the new village cleric and is obliged to give sermons and spiritual advice to those seeking counsel. Even though the character repents in the end, giving the film a moral twist, his lampooning was met with hostility by many conservatives and their supporters.

The film was prohibited by many cinemas and others were broken into and reels of the film stolen. One of the leading conservative newspapers launched a campaign against the film, renaming it 'The Scorpion' because of its poisonous sting.⁸⁴ 'It has many bad teachings and it should be banned,' said Ayatollah Jannati.⁸⁵ Although not all members of the clergy agreed with this statement, with one cleric remarking that 'The film was great – I was laughing so hard that I could hardly hold my turban on my head!', the hardliners were ultimately triumphant and the film was banned.⁸⁶ 'It was the loud, unhappy minority, who eventually won the game. I hope this would be a temporary ban, and I think it takes some time for all to absorb the message,' commented the director, before adding, 'I think the film will make a comeback'.⁸⁷

Indeed not all members of the Islamic clergy feel such disdain towards the medium of film, and one cleric, Ali Afsahi, a professor of cinema has been defrocked, imprisoned three times and stripped of his teaching privileges because of his weakness for Western films. Mr Afsahi held screenings of films for students and clergy members, as he strived to defend cinema as a legitimate art form. He was bold enough to show *Natural Born Killers* to a group of clerics, many of whom left deeply offended and enraged. When in court, he refused to renounce his passion for Ingmar Bergman and Oliver Stone and even offered to show their films to the judge who convicted him.⁸⁸

The most recent parade of strength and part of the new government's wider cultural clampdown against Western influences, has taken the form of a directive. The President

⁸² *Ibid.* at 48.

⁸³ *Ibid.* at 56. Information about *Snowman* has been taken from this page.

⁸⁴ 'Lizard Director Stays with Religion', *BBC News*, (9 June 2004), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3786905.stm>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ De Luce, note 14.

issued a decree banning all foreign films promoting, ‘secularism, feminism, nihilism, unethical behaviour, drug abuse, or violence’.⁸⁹ The ruling, announced in October 2005, bans the distribution and screening of all foreign films that degrade ‘the true culture of Islamic societies’ and feature propaganda for ‘the world oppression’ – or in other words, US hegemony.⁹⁰

For Ali Reza Motamedi, a film writer in Tehran, the decree is nonsensical and will prove extremely difficult to enforce. ‘The concepts that are mentioned in the ban such as nihilism and secularism are so general and in the cinema industry they are so abstract that it is not easy to determine through such a ruling whether a film promotes secularism or nihilism,’ he said. ‘Or there is the question of whether a film can really promote feminism or not. In fact, it means that we want to defend a patriarchic cinematography when it comes to the screening of foreign films.’⁹¹

Mr Motamedi’s latter observation can be linked to one of the principal problems in Iranian cinema – the portrayal of women. The early years saw a particularly dramatic decline in the number of scripts with female roles, if any at all. One of the primary difficulties facing directors was and continues to be the problem of intimacy, which no matter how trivial between men and women, even between mother and son, is strictly forbidden. According to one actress:

I was supposed to play the role of a mother whose only son had just returned from the war after a long absence. Since I was not allowed to embrace, smell, let alone kiss him, I had to pretend that I was so excited by seeing him that I became rooted to the spot.⁹²

To overcome this obstacle, many filmmakers did at first use members of the same family, so that physical contact between them was acceptable. Some filmmakers even considered the possibility of a *Sigeh* (temporary marriage) between men and women. The *Sigeh* is the religious establishment’s solution to prostitution, as it legitimises sexual relations between men and women, if only for a few hours. This, however, was not ultimately an option for directors as the crew would still be present.

As romantic love was in no way allowed to be depicted on the screen, filmmakers were forced to channel this emotion through children who became surrogate adults. *Hejab* had to and still must be worn at all times, including in private spheres such as the home, which makes for highly unrealistic films. Women were assigned to the traditional roles of mother or wife and sat in the shadows, pouring tea for their husbands and sons. When moving, they had to ensure that their curves remained indistinguishable. One post-revolutionary director has joked that it would be best for female actors to remain seated at all times so that attention is not drawn to their ‘provocative walk’, thus allowing the male audience to concentrate on the loftier ‘ideologies’ within the film.⁹³

With the passing of time, this stereotype has been vigorously challenged both by male and female directors and the boundaries within which women must manoeuvre have been continually contested. Female directors have produced a notable body of work and stand alongside their male counterparts at the forefront of Iranian cinema. Tamineh Milani, an ardent defender of women’s rights, is just one such example. After criticizing the MCIG

⁸⁹ G Esfandiari, ‘Tehran Bans Movies that Promote Nihilism and Feminism’, *RF/ERL*, 24 October 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/10/2e0d4377-dc01-4af4-924e-f4a0cea4479a.html>.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Soltani, note 67.

⁹³ Mostyn, note 19 above at 37.

in a speech, Ms Milani's film *Kakado* (1994) was banned by the authorities and she has since faced a myriad number of difficulties in obtaining approval for her screenplays. Her predicament deteriorated considerably in 2001, when she was imprisoned and condemned to death for 'supporting factions waging war against God' and misusing the arts.⁹⁴ Following an international outcry, Ms Milani's sentence has since been revoked. The arrest followed the release of her film *The Hidden Half*, which narrates the tale of a wife who reveals her politically turbulent past to her husband, a judge who is deciding the fate of a similar woman facing execution.

But for film critic and playwright Parvaneh Soltani, no matter how far cinema has progressed, 'the real face of women, her true presence and being in the cinema is still absent'.⁹⁵ 'This face,' she says, 'has been cut up and this has really damaged the image of Iranian women, which has become deformed, censored, half there, half absent.' For Ms Soltani, Iranian cinema does not 'show the reality of how women really are.' If a woman is dictated to and continually told, 'cover yourself, don't laugh like this, don't look like this, don't do this, or that,' she continues, 'well this person will never be herself.' Ms Soltani refers to the condition of Iranian women as 'schizophrenic' as they have, 'two lives, a life outside the house and the life inside her house.' The life shown in cinema she says, 'is the outside life, the one that exists within the [Islamic] framework, so it is in my opinion, not realistic at all.'

Censorship, which Ms Soltani refers to as a 'colossal pair of scissors' is largely responsible for this distortion. 'It's like you have to move in a box,' she says. Even female directors such as Tamineh Milani must still compromise. Although these directors may depict women who are struggling against the system, they still portray them as women who are, 'good women, demure, who still cook and who look after their children,' in their attempts to placate censors. But in reality, says Ms Soltani, 'Women are all different, each has her own lifestyle, her own look ... you cannot fit everyone into a mould and say this is what you should be. It's impossible.'

Representations of women, Ms Soltani admits, are difficult to execute accurately as women in Iran still bear the shackles of a patriarchal society and past. 'There are so many chains,' she says, 'the chain of society is around her ankle, the chain of history is around her ankle, they are all tied around her. For a woman who wants to free herself, there is so much she must unburden herself from.' But, Ms Soltani acknowledges that 'we can be optimistic, because they are still struggling, they are vivacious, their hearts are still beating and fighting to express themselves.'

Indeed, Ms Soltani is right. But it is not only female directors that refuse to concede defeat, but all aspirant filmmakers in Iran, who continue to search for alternative channels with which to express themselves. In an interview with ARTICLE 19, one student admitted that she had not obtained filming permission from the MCIG for her documentary on Iranian journalists. One method of circumvention is to film in the private sphere. 'I know a lot of film students who are making their films inside each others homes,' she revealed. Similarly, filmmaker Arash Sahami, who currently resides in London, did not concern himself with obtaining approval for his documentary, *Execution of a Teenage Girl*, which reconstructs the events leading up to the execution of 16-year-old Atefeh, put to death for committing crimes against chastity.

⁹⁴ Ross, note 25.

⁹⁵ These quotes are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

Producing such documentaries through official channels in Iran has proven to be particularly problematic. How is it possible for a filmmaker to accurately depict Iranian life through the lens while simultaneously adhering to the government's ideals of social decorum? It would appear that the two cannot co-exist. London-based filmmaker Ziba Mir-Hosseini faced numerous difficulties during the filming of her documentary *Divorce, Iranian Style*. The documentary was granted permission after 'twenty months of negotiations', during which time, her application was repeatedly rejected because of its contentious subject matter – divorce, in Iran, from a woman's perspective.⁹⁶ At one point, she was informed that her proposal was too vague and that a full script, details of the characters and locations would be required, which of course is contrary to the very nature of a documentary. 'We explained that an observational documentary,' Ms Hosseini wrote in an article afterwards, 'by definition, allows stories to present themselves to the camera and to develop while filming; we could not define and constrain beforehand.'⁹⁷ Although the documentary was eventually completed, it was not allowed to be shown in Iran.

But so great is their love for film that along with students and filmmakers such as Mr Sahami, there are a great many Iranians prepared to risk filming without permission from the MCIG. The inhabitants of Khosro, a village of cinephiles in Iran, made fictitious and illegal thrillers based on their own lives and the characters in their village. Armed with only an 8mm camera, the village director (who was also the local brickmaker) and his crew of peasants riding on donkeys or even on each other's backs, produced films for ten years before they were discovered by the authorities. They were all arrested for not having obtained official approval for these films and sent to prison.

After three months in solitary confinement and after they had vowed that they would never film illegally again, they were approached by director Moslem Mansouri to make one last film, while he and his crew filmed them making it. The villagers could not resist such an enticing temptation and so the film *The Trial* (2002) was born.⁹⁸ Mr Mansouri himself had secretly produced eight underground documentaries about those living under a theocratic regime during 1994-98, before seeking asylum in the USA in 1999.⁹⁹

Although Iranians have shown tremendous resourcefulness and have refused in many ways to surrender to Iran's strict regime of censorship, filming without permission for the MCIG, it should be stressed, carries the risk of often harsh penalties. Furthermore, most filmmakers are prevented from fulfilling their true potential. In the words of Ms Soltani, 'if you took away the scissors, took away the censorship and told these directors to express themselves how they wanted to, you would get very different results.' 'These people are creative, they have wonderful ideas,' she continues, 'but whenever they have an idea, they come up against a barrier.'

5. THEATRE

The onset of the Cultural Revolution was accompanied by a severe distrust of theatre, especially of the kind imbued with Western tradition. Many great Iranian playwrights fled

⁹⁶ Z Mir-Hosseini, 'Negotiating the Politics of Gender in Iran: An Ethnography of a Documentary', in R Tapper (ed.), *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (London: I B Tauris, 2002), 2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* at 7.

⁹⁸ S Abdoh, 'Iran as Cinema', *Words Without Borders*, <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article.php?lab=Cinema>.

⁹⁹ 'Trial', *Sidewalk*, <http://www.sidewalkfest.com/2004/film-trial.htm>.

the country and although theatre production was not banned, as those in power recognised its potential as a vehicle for propaganda, it was not able to escape the heavy-hand of censorship. The sole permitted purpose of theatre productions during these early years was to laud the Revolution and its accomplishments.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, however, breathed new life into the arts as the nation, fatigued by the miseries of an eight-year war, hungrily anticipated being able to live, rather than die, once more. Drama schools re-opened and a flurry of theatre festivals began to emerge. Between 1997 and 2001, when the reformist government was in power, Iran experienced a 'theatre boom' as state subsidies increased by 1000 per cent.¹⁰⁰ In 2002 alone, 200,000 theatre tickets were sold during the 12-day Fajr Theatre Festival, a phenomenon unprecedented in any other Islamic country.¹⁰¹

The current theatre scene in Iran is consequently a vibrant one, with the annual Fajr Theatre Festival, being the largest of its kind in the Middle East. This festival is considered one of the many gems that can be found in the treasure box of Iranian culture and receives much international acclaim every year. It is not, however, exempt from the Byzantine web of red tape that faces all Iranian artists and their desire to create. According to one theatre critic, Laleh Taghian, the change of government in 2005, has meant that the festival is now controlled by political and religious officials, who have suspended the publication of theatre journals and enforced an even stricter regime of censorship upon the creative process. 'Censorship,' she remarks, 'has gotten worse – the theatre groups can hardly say anything onstage anymore.'¹⁰²

Instead, plays are pregnant with symbolism and metaphor as playwrights challenge officials by compelling the audience to read between the lines. Looks, gestures and props speak volumes to a 'public of connoisseurs'¹⁰³ who have developed the ability to interpret these ciphers. For playwright Kiomars Moradi,

Every period in world history has witnessed censorship in different countries to gag the voice of dissent. For a real artist, creation is the keyboard. He need not talk about politics directly. If his or her creation has the profundity and subtlety of expression he or she can express thoughts without courting the displeasure of the rulers. Iranian artists have always fought against rigid censorship and contemporary theatre practitioners are continuing this tradition, experimenting with new expressive means, taking native Iranian materials.¹⁰⁴

In an interview with ARTICLE 19, director Vahid Evazzadeh reinforced the idea that much can be derived from Iranian theatre, which is simply less explicit than its Western counterpart. 'There are performances,' he remarks, 'that are absolutely erotic, yet all the women are covered in long coats and scarves. So you see it's not all black and white.'

On one level then, the dramatic arts scene in Iran is flourishing in spite of censorship. Not that this should be used as a pretext to underplay the detrimental effects that such rigid controls can have on artistic expression. Playwrights and directors face myriad difficulties throughout the production of their plays. To begin with, they practise self-censorship, although even use of this term is debatable as the margins of artistic freedom have become

¹⁰⁰ W Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington DC: Mage Publishers, 2005), 299.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* at 300.

¹⁰² D Marcus, 'Poised between censorship and openness', *Qantara*, 4 February 2005, http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/ c-310/ nr-157/i.html.

¹⁰³ Floor, note 99 at 300.

¹⁰⁴ D S Bajeli, 'Scripts beyond the stage', *The Hindu*, 17 February 2006, <http://www.hindu.com/fr/2006/02/17/stories/2006021701360300.htm>.

so ingrained in the Iranian mind. This paradox is captured by Mr Evazzadeh's pithy observation that it is as if Iranians are 'born with self-censorship'.

The next obstacle to be overcome, involves a struggle with Iran's convoluted system of bureaucracy to obtain approval for productions. Frustratingly, even after authorisation is granted, there are no guarantees that the play will not be withdrawn at any point during its production, including, right at the end. This is precisely what happened to director Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, whose production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was closed on its fourth public performance, after which he was arrested for 'raping the public's innocence'.¹⁰⁵

In his article 'Exiled to Freedom: A Memoir of Censorship in Iran', Mr Karimi-Hakak describes the long-winded, expurgating stages of theatre production in Iran.¹⁰⁶ As approval must firstly be obtained from the MCIG, the director must submit the script and a list of all cast and crew involved in the play. The director must also respond to any critical comments made by the MCIG, making all necessary amendments until the script is deemed suitable for public viewing. The final version of the script cannot be deviated from in any way, which of course means that improvisation is out of the question. Tediously, each criterion must be approved by a different office and so authorisation can take months, even years to obtain. In Mr Karimi-Hakak's case, permission for *Midsummer* took a full five years to be granted.

The second stage of censorship involves a further infringement on the creative process, as those involved in the production must ensure that they do not in anyway flout the unstipulated laws of moral conduct. Men and women must treat each other in a professional, reserved manner, addressing each other by their second names and using the formal second person pronoun. Women must not wear figure-hugging clothes, nor must repeated eye contact be made. Excessive smiling or laughter is considered inappropriate and any form of touching, even a handshake, is strictly forbidden and can lead to the closure of the play or those involved being blacklisted, or worse still, being publicly whipped or imprisoned.

Once and *if* the play has overcome these hurdles, it is vetted by a group of government observers before it is presented to the public. If required, modifications must once again be made. Yet even after this rigmarole, as was the case with *Midsummer*, the play can be regarded as an affront upon moral sensibilities and closed down, and those involved, arrested. As frequently occurs in Iran, plays are finally subject to the public's sense of propriety, which if affronted can lead to its prohibition or worse still, mob violence.

6. LITERATURE

'Pens which do not write for Islamic values,' declared Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic revolution, 'must be broken'.¹⁰⁷ And indeed they have been. And along with their pens, writers too have been crushed; arrested, imprisoned, tortured and even executed. On a historic note, there is perhaps no time in the past when the pen has not been subject to the hostility and the scrutiny of censorship by the powers that be; testament to its immense influence. The power of words, long recognised, has led to the prohibition of countless

¹⁰⁵ M Karimi-Hakak, 'Exiled to freedom: a memoir of censorship in Iran', 47 *The Drama Review*, (2003), 17.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* at 19.

¹⁰⁷ S Saba, 'Brave Iranian Writer who Stood Against Tyranny', *The Guardian*, 20 June 2000, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,3604,334292,00.html>.

books and the muzzling of those magicians so adept at conjuring ideas and with such eloquence that their restraint becomes crucial.

In 1981, the bloody crusade against writers and books commenced with a pivotal assault on institutions that defended freedom of expression, such as *Kanoon*, the Association of Writers. The years that followed are tainted by the activities of an uncompromising system of repression, which aspired to obliterate all dissent. Numerous books were confiscated and used to fuel the flames of bonfires; bookshops were closed; independent publishers banned.¹⁰⁸ A large number of writers, poets and intellectuals left the country, fearing either for their lives, or quite simply so that they could think and write freely.

In 1994, when it appeared that matters had reached their peak, a group of 134 Iranian writers gathered together and penned the ‘Declaration of 134 Iranian writers’, calling for an end to literary censorship.¹⁰⁹ The declaration stipulates that it is the prerogative of writers to ‘create their work, criticise and judge the works of others’ and equally for their writings to reach the public ‘freely and without hindrance’. ‘We oppose all hurdles,’ it continues, ‘placed on writing and thinking.’ Ultimately, the manifesto’s goal was to effect ‘the removal of all obstacles on the road to freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of publication.’ Little did the signatories know that by writing this declaration, a new chapter of persecution, much worse than before, would begin.

A spate of murders followed.¹¹⁰ The body of Ahmad Mir-Alai, writer and translator was found in an alley. He reportedly died of a heart attack. Ghaffar Hosseini, poet and translator, was found bloody and dead in his home. His death too was blamed on a heart attack. Ghazaleh Alizadeh, a renowned story writer, was found dead a long way from her home. She allegedly committed suicide. Ebrahim Zalzadeh, a publisher, was kidnapped after publishing and defending the manifesto. His mutilated body was found in a wasteland. Chilling to note is that in her book *Iran Awakening*, Shirin Ebadi writes of one the popular methods of assassination used at this time - targets were injected with potassium to produce seemingly natural heart attacks.¹¹¹

Perhaps most well-known are the serial killings of leading dissident intellectuals and writers in 1998, orchestrated, it is widely acknowledged, by leading members of the conservative clergy and the then President Rafsanjani. Murdered were Dariush Forouhar, the leader of the Iran’s People Party and his wife Parvaneh Eskandari; Mohammad Mokhtari, a poet, member of *Kanoon* and ‘Declaration of 134 Writers’ signatory; and Mohammad Pouyandeh, an essayist, translator of French literature and also a member of *Kanoon*. The complicity of these murders was exposed by journalist and political dissident Akbar Ganji in his best-selling book, *Dungeon of Ghosts* – a collection of his condemning newspaper articles. Mr Ganji was imprisoned for six years following its release, for ‘propaganda against the Islamic regime and its institutions’.¹¹²

The hit list, according to distinguished writer, poet and literary critic Reza Baraheni, consisted of 184 of the most prominent writers and intellectuals of the country and almost all those who had signed the ‘Declaration’. It was when he was in Sweden, waiting for affairs in Iran to settle, that Mr Baraheni discovered that he was also on this list. Other well-known

¹⁰⁸ M Khaksar, ‘The Pen and the Islamic Republic: A Chronicle of Resistance’, <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/art/khaksar.html>.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The 1994 Declaration of 134 Writers’, <http://www.iranian.com/News/Dec98/declaration.html>.

¹¹⁰ Khaksar, note 108. Details of these murders are from this article.

¹¹¹ Ebadi, note 36 at 132.

¹¹² Reporters without Borders, ‘Akbar Ganji Begins Fourth Year in Prison’, 22 April 2003, http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=6288.

individuals, such as the political satirist Hadi Khorsandi and the journalist Massoud Behnoud, revealed to ARTICLE 19 that they too were on this list.

Alongside these murders flowed a stream of slander in the state-controlled press, television and radio against many of the signatories. Most notably, vilification campaigns were carried out by *Keyhan*, which Mr Baraheni refers to as the ‘most rapid newspaper in the world’.

Mr Baraheni himself was imprisoned both during the Shah’s reign and after. Firstly for his writing, a part of which focused on women and secondly, for being an Azeri, one of Iran’s many ethnicities, which authorities have in the past endeavoured to suppress. ‘The prison was horrible,’ he says, ‘and I’ve said somewhere else that to be 24 hours in a Khomeini prison was worse than being 100 days in the Shah’s prison, because you never knew what was going to happen to you and there seems to be no rules or no rights of imprisonment.’ At one time, he was even once placed before a firing squad, ‘although only by mistake’.

In his efforts to publish his work, Mr Baraheni experienced numerous difficulties. It took him six years to obtain distribution permission for his book *The Mysteries of My Land*, even though the work itself had been approved, necessary amendments had been made and copies of the book already printed. Distribution was eventually consented to, although Mr Baraheni acknowledges that it was because Mr Khatami was Minister of the MCIG (1982-1992) at this time. Following the book’s release, all 6000 copies were sold in 24 hours. Reprinting the book was delayed for six months because of a scarcity of paper, but on its re-release, it sold out in 24 hours once again. A further five editions were printed and approximately 28,000 copies were sold in 18 months. Unfortunately not long after, Mr Khatami resigned from his position and the hardliners seized control, preventing his book from being published ever again.

Books in Iran are of course not exempt from the brutality of censorship and must undergo an exhaustive examination by the MCIG, before permission for their publication is granted. The regulations governing book publication are both proscriptive and prescriptive in their nature, outlining both what writers should avoid as well as what they should endeavour to embrace. Some of the regulations are as follows:¹¹³

(A) The MCIG encourages material:

- Guarding the positive outcomes of the Islamic revolution, and struggling to strengthen and expand these outcomes.
- Introducing the Islamic Revolution through the compilation and publication of valuable scientific and cultural works.

(B) The MCIG prohibits material which:

- ...[P]rofanates and denies the meanings of religion
- Propagates prostitution and moral corruption.
- Incites the public to an uprising against and opposition to the order of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Propagates the objectives of destructive and unlawful groups and strayed sects and defends monarchic and dictatorial regimes.
- Creates unrest and conflict between tribes and religious groups and injures the unity of society and the territorial integrity of the country.
- Insults or weakens national pride and patriotism and creates loss of self-confidence before the culture, civilisation and imperialistic regimes of the West or East.

¹¹³ Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 28.

- Propagates dependence on a global power and objects to the line of thinking based on preserving the independence of the country.

The absence of clarity in these guidelines, which are enforced or relaxed depending on who is in power, has led many writers, eager to avoid financial burdens, practising self-censorship. Self-censorship, says Mr Baraheni, has ‘almost become a kind of method in Persian literature of the last let’s say 60 or 70 years.’

Books are, unsurprisingly, subject to a multi-faceted censorship process before they are released. A more subtle ruse is the refusal of paper, which is regulated by the state.¹¹⁴ During the Iran-Iraq war, many of Iran’s paper plants were destroyed and so today, paper is imported and rationed by the government who dispenses it, subject to its whims. The MCIG allocates paper for all approved publications, leaving other aspirant writers, to purchase paper on the black-market at ludicrously high prices.

Publishers, although free to select manuscripts, do so with the utmost care. They justifiably have reservations about scripts, which they consider might be rejected by the MCIG. A number of copies of the manuscript are then printed and one copy submitted to the MCIG, who will respond in one of three ways.¹¹⁵ The first response is one of approval, the second of disapproval and the third, quite simply, no response at all. The second response will often be accompanied by a demand for modifications, required to render the book more palatable. If the book is then approved, a further number of copies are provided to the ministry for subsequent authorization and pricing. Once again, further amendments might be insisted upon, or the ministry might decide not to respond at all – tantamount to complete censorship.

Pricing is another less ostensible tool of censorship, as books can be priced too expensively to be affordable, or too cheaply to cover production costs.¹¹⁶ Nor does official permission guarantee that a book will be reprinted or circulated for a long period of time and in the past, books have been withdrawn only a matter of weeks after their publication. As with all other spheres of artistic enterprise in Iran, the public are the final arbiters of morality and so a book’s shelf-life is subject to their reaction. If censorship occurs at a late stage, amendments can incur significant costs for the author, publisher, printer and binder, especially if the book is prohibited once it has been published.

Although there exists a vibrant underground literary scene, including the distribution of banned books and poetry, these materials tend to be expensive and circulation is limited. Mohammad Sefryan, a student who recently fled Iran, told ARTICLE 19 of one such project.¹¹⁷ Mr Sefryan and a group of his friends had rented a house and filled it with books and films forbidden by the government. Their key objective was to reproduce and distribute this prohibited material, but close friends, also used the house as a library. After some time, the house was discovered, the items seized and his friends arrested. Fortunately for Mr Sefryan, he was not in Tehran when the authorities raided the house and not long after, he crossed the border into Turkey.

As a writer himself, Mr Sefryan had experienced first-hand the unfavourable outlook of the MCIG. His writings were refused publishing permission on several occasions. One such piece of work, a philosophical treatise that examines paths to contentment, was rejected because of its failure to reference Islam as a factor in the attainment of human happiness.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 75.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* at 73-4. These responses are a summary of these pages.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 74. The pricing system is explained on this page.

¹¹⁷ Mohammad Sefryan’s quotes have been taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

According to Mr Sefryan, ‘The government opposes free thinking because it is threat to Islam.’

Mr Sefryan’s current novel tackles the issue of expression from a very different perspective. He narrates the tale of an academic who, feeling utterly suffocated by the restrictions imposed on him, decides to seek asylum abroad. The protagonist of this novel, desperate to flee Iran, claims asylum under the pretext of homosexuality, which in Iran is punishable by death. The novel describes the great lengths the character is willing to go to, in order to verify his claim, thus illustrating the profound effect that the curtailment of expression can potentially exert on the individual.

Mention of issues concerned with sexuality is unsurprisingly taboo in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Esteemed novelist Shahrnosh Parsipour, whose novels explore complex mystical and feminine themes, is currently living in exile after being imprisoned for mentioning the subject of virginity in her novel *Women without Men*. Although she was eventually acquitted, her publishing house was bombed and her books have since been banned.¹¹⁸

But it is not just literature within Iran, but outside as well which has fallen victim to the regime. Most famously, is the *fatwa* issued against novelist Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses*. The novel caused a stir amongst Islamic circles because of what was perceived as an irreverent depiction of the prophet Mohammed. It was declared as blasphemous, an insult to Islam and banned. In 1992, a group of 50 Iranian writers and intellectuals living in exile condemned the *fatwa* in a written declaration. All of the signatories were promptly vilified in the state press, their work prohibited and the *fatwa* extended to them.¹¹⁹

In 2003, Ms Nafisi wrote of her experiences both as a professor of English Literature and subsequently as the coordinator of a covert reading group, in her autobiographical book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. As a lecturer, novels such as *The Great Gatsby* proved to particularly problematic because of its allusions to drinking and adultery without censure. Henry James’s novel *Daisy Miller* also troubled students who could not decide whether Daisy was a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ person. Morality became an issue central to the reading and publishing of Western literature. ‘Could one really concentrate on one’s job,’ writes Ms Nafisi, ‘when what preoccupied the faculty was how to excise the word *wine* from a Hemingway story, when they decided not to teach Emilie Brontë because she appeared to condone adultery?’¹²⁰

It was only a matter of time before such books were prohibited. ‘First the censors banned most of them,’ writes Ms Nafisi, ‘then the government stopped them from being sold: most of the foreign-language bookstores were closed or had to rely on their pre-revolutionary stock.’¹²¹ ‘We lived in a culture,’ she continues, ‘that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent – ideology.’¹²²

For these reasons, Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* struck a chord within the book group; they saw in the fate of the helpless Lolita at the mercy of Humbert, their own situation mirrored. Lolita was the victim of Humbert’s fantasy, just as every person in Iran had become a victim of the regime’s fantasy; a regime that wanted to censor all narratives apart from its own and to force everyone else to play a predetermined role in it. ‘The desperate truth of Lolita’s

¹¹⁸ Bahar, Silberberg & Brown, note 5 above at 13.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* at 91.

¹²⁰ Nafisi, note 33 at 11.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* at 39.

¹²² *Ibid.* at 25.

story,' says Ms Nafisi, 'is not the rape of a 12-year-old by a dirty old man, but the confiscation of one individual's life by another.'¹²³

7. POETRY

*O dagger
I wish you had rebelled
Against that hand!*

*You ripped their chests
And cut their tongues
So that a single voice would remain
You forgot that one who only listens
To one's own voice
Is a madman, oh no!
But a desperate tyrant*

*Let all tongues speak
Let all pens seek
So that dialogue supplants sermon
And all become beautiful*

*O dagger
You look more beautiful
In your sheath*

Majid Naficy¹²⁴

Poetry is many things to many people and has over the course of history been defined in many ways. For Wordsworth it was the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'; for Dylan Thomas, it is 'what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing.'¹²⁵ Perhaps, however, it would be more fitting not to attempt a definition, but allow poetry to remain elusive and ethereal, as to label poetry is to constrain it and thus destroy the very freedom which is essential to its existence. Poetry is in this sense like the wind - once captured and boxed, it ceases to be. Continuing with this metaphor, it is possible to compare the censorship of poetry in Iran to precisely this captivity, this bottling of the wind. And for those who need the breeze of creativity to flow freely, this strangulation of poetic expression is nothing short of suffocation.

The censorship of poetry is particularly difficult to bear in a country whose history is saturated with the verses of famous poets such as Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Hafez and Saadi. These ancient and undisputed giants of Iranian poetry from 11th, 12th and 13th century Iran,

¹²³ M Atwood, 'A Book Lover's Tale', *Amnesty International Magazine*, (2003), http://www.amnestyusa.org/magazine/fall_2003/book_lover/.

¹²⁴ This is a poem by Majid Naficy about the serial murders of intellectuals, orchestrated allegedly by members of the clergy and the then President Rafsanjani. It is about the silencing of their voices through their murders. See the Chapter on Literature for more information about these executions.

¹²⁵ 'Poets on Poetry', http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/poets_on_poetry.htm.

are read by millions both inside and out of the country. So rooted in Iranian culture is poetry that it is, according to film critic Mark Cousins, 'in Iran's bloodstream'. 'Even illiterate villagers,' he continues, quote the writings of great poets, 'in everyday conversations'.¹²⁶

And indeed he is not mistaken. References to these poets are interwoven in everyday conversation and not just by intellectuals either. 'No one who has lived any period of time in Iran escapes exposure to Hafez because he is everywhere in the culture,' says Reza Ordoubadian, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University. 'In the market places and in the streets, on the radio stations and among lovers, between husbands and wives, children at school, and taxi drivers.'¹²⁷ Alongside the Koran, volumes of poetry are likely to be found in even the poorest households. In fact, so great is their love of poetry, that every year thousands make a pilgrimage to the tombs of Hafez and Khayyam to seek spiritual counsel from these mystical poets.

It is fortunate that the popularity of these ancient poets is so great that although their work is littered with references to wine and contains the occasional religious jibe, it has not been banned. The same cannot unfortunately be said of contemporary films, literature or other means of expression which depict wine or alcohol and its consumption. Instead, the clergy has chosen to reinterpret the poetry of the great masters so that its publication is justified. Epicurean allusions to wine and merry-making have been given a more spiritual spin. The wine, the clergy has declared, is symbolic; the inebriation, an intoxication with the spirit of God; and the 'tavern', a religious centre. The perceived thirst for wine is in fact, they argue, a thirst for God. 'The drink is from a fruit but non-alcoholic, to bring one closer to God – to the next level,' says student Mohammad Sadesh Zeighami.¹²⁸ 'That is what we are taught. I don't think it is wine.' 'It is not wine,' concurs Masoud Namat Ali, a tour guide. 'He didn't drink. Hafez was a good Muslim.'¹²⁹ Symbolism in the arts it seems, is perfectly permissible to the clergy, when they so wish.

Sadly not all poets in Iran, past or present, have the reputations of these masters. And so in this 'land of poetry,'¹³⁰ a country whose heritage is resplendent with illustrious poets, today's climate is such that many Iranian poets have been forced to flee their homeland or to write clandestinely.

'Have you ever seen a nightingale apply for a permit to sing? Have you seen anyone executing a bird because of its heavenly song?'¹³¹ These are just some of the questions that poet Shirin Razavian asks in her poem *Exile* before embarking on a poignant description of the plight countless Iranian poets face, when choked by the 'barbwire of silence,' they decide to escape their native land. 'You fly all the way across the oceans and the mountains,' she writes, 'across the forests and deserts to find yourself a new nest, where you can rest on a branch and sing freely.' Yet freedom, she relates, is far from easy to attain; in a new land, free to sing, you discover that nobody understands your voice.

Ms Razavian's portrayal is a tale familiar to many Iranian poets who, having fled Iran now live scattered around the world. All nevertheless seem to concur that after overcoming the barrier of language the sense of emancipation they feel is akin to letting a

¹²⁶ M Cousins, 'Cinema Iran', http://www.channel4.com/film/filmontv/microsites/C/cinema_iran.html.

¹²⁷ R Ordoubadian, 'Satisfaction of Human Appetites', *The Iranian*, 4 August 2006, <http://www.iranian.com/RezaOrdoubadian/2006/August/Hafez/index.html>.

¹²⁸ P Cochrane, 'A Vintage Twist for Iran's Classical Poets', *World Press*, 28 November 2004, <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/1985.cfm>.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Robab Moheb's quotes are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 and have been translated by the author.

¹³¹ S Razavian, 'Exile', http://www.shirinrazavian.com/english/english_poems.html.

caged bird free. For some, however, years of censorship and self-censorship can never be truly effaced. 'It is difficult for Iranian women, even outside the country, who have grown up as a child in Iran, to overcome the hurdle of their shame,' says Dr Sam Vaseghi, a poet, playwright and writer. 'They want to say something and they can't.'

In an interview with ARTICLE 19, one poet, Robab Moheb, describes the relief she felt after moving to Sweden in 1992. In Iran, Ms Moheb had faced censorship both from the state and her conservative Muslim father who disapproved of her writing poetry. Like many other poets in Iran, she chose to conceal her true identity, by hiding behind a pseudonym. In 1997, while living in exile, Ms Moheb decided to send a book of what she considered to be innocuous poetry for publication in Iran. She was not contacted by the MCIG until 2005, when she discovered that her book was to be published.

Following its publication, she discovered that two of her poems had been omitted, words in her poems had been changed and verses and lines shifted around so that their rhythm and sense were radically altered. 'Censorship,' she says, 'is much more serious than I had realised.' Ms Moheb was also greatly baffled by the clear lack of logic behind the censorship process, as more provocative lines were left intact while other, perfectly harmless words were modified or altogether removed. The absence of any apparent rationale behind the expurgation of her poetry has led Ms Moheb to believe that censorship in Iran is an 'obsession' without rhyme or reason.

This seemingly haphazard censorship in Iran has had a profound effect on the poetry being written today. Iranian poetry is 'afflicted by ambiguity as poets cannot write frankly or truthfully,' says Ms Moheb. The abstract nature of this poetry not only clouds its sense, but everything in it is assigned to another realm so that it is detached from any sense of reality: 'All love has become a figurative kind of love and all words have become metaphorical so that it is as if nothing belongs to this world anymore.' For Dr Vaseghi, poetry in Iran cannot be labelled poetry as 'Poetry means you express what you want to express.' 'Poetry,' the poet Reza Baraheni says, 'written with the concept of censorship in your mind becomes extremely bad.' And so while there exists a wealth of talented poets living amongst the Iranian diaspora, the culture of poetry within Iran, without the sustenance of free expression and the interchange of ideas, essential for the evolution of all art, is gradually wasting away.

For writer and poet Roya Hakakian, 'whereas the 1950s, 60s and 70s had been marked by the emergence of several giants of poetry, the past 26 years have not produced a single major poet comparable to, or as popular as, those.'¹³² Instead, poets are paying out of their own pockets to publish their books, selling fewer than a thousand copies each time. Although classics such as Hafez do sell as many copies of the Koran, this, says Hakakian is not indicative of the current state of poetry: 'Just as the continued staging of Shakespeare is no reflection on the state of drama in the English-speaking world, neither is the popularity of Hafez an indicator of the state of poetry in Iran.'¹³³

For Ms Razavian, although the 'arts in general have reached new heights in Iran,' as 'the most passionate heart-rending works of art come from troubled times and troubled areas,' the same cannot be said of poetry. It is her opinion that although 'through suffering the artist reaches amazing new discoveries and inspirations ... with poetry the linguistic restrictions are too immense.' 'Poetry,' she continues, 'is a more direct way of communication and expressing your emotions.' Nevertheless, she adds, 'We do still have some work coming from Iran that is shining in the international and national scene.'

¹³² R Hakakian, 'In 1979 it was Blood. In 2005, is it Pragmatism?', 19 June 2005, http://www.royahakakian.com/articles/roya_hakakian_pragmatism.html.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

When good poetry is written in Iran, it is of course subject to the scrutiny of the censor's pen. One such poet, Simin Behbahani, is considered by many to be the country's greatest living poet. She is described by one critic as the poet who 'never sold her pen or soul,' by remaining true to the plight of Iranians and consistent in her fight for free expression.¹³⁴ Ms Behbahani is also one of the signatories of the 'Declaration of 134 Iranian writers' and extols the importance of free expression in one of her poems:

*To stay alive, you must slay silence...
to pay homage to being, you must sing*¹³⁵

This persistence in speaking out at all costs against the tyranny of the clergy and their violations of free expression, led to a 10-year ban on her poetry after the revolution, followed by subsequent years of censorship and frequent vilification in the state-controlled press. One night in 1996, Ms Behbahani was arrested and taken to jail. 'I was slapped around, blindfolded and taken to prison,' she recalled. 'We were released the next morning. They led us out and dropped us in the middle of the street with our blindfolds still tied.'¹³⁶

Ms Behbahani's inspiration comes from another contemporary female poet, Forough Farrokhzad, for many, the most celebrated woman in the history of Persian literature. Her poetry is, unsurprisingly, banned by the Islamic Republic. Although Ms Farrokhzad passed away in 1967, the themes of her poetry are still resonant and continue to touch the hearts of the nation, while arousing the antipathy of the clergy. She is controversial both because she was a divorcee and because of her openly feminist poetry. Her work explores women who felt 'drowned in [their] innocent youth', who wanted to tear the veils from their heads and who wanted to express their most natural desires.¹³⁷ Verging on the erotic, it is no surprise that it is prohibited:

*In the silence of the temple of desire
I am lying beside your passionate body;
My kisses have left their marks on your shoulders
Like fiery bites of a snake*

("The Songs of Beauty," *Rebellion*)¹³⁸

The poetry of another distinguished 20th century poet, Ahmad Shamlou, was also banned until his death in 2000. A life-long campaigner for freedom of expression and considered to be one of the most eminent of the contemporary Iranian poets, his work was prohibited after he penned the anti-regime poem, *In this Dead-end*.¹³⁹

*Your mouth they smell
Lest you have said I love you
Your heart they smell*

¹³⁴ N Boustany, 'A Poet who Never Sold her Pen or Soul', *The Washington Post*, 10 June 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/09/AR2006060902025.html>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ M Kianush, 'Forough Farrokhzad', http://www.cse.msu.edu/~borzoo/non-acd/poet_modern.htm.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Alavi, note 21 above at 93-4.

Such a strange time it is, my beloved

*And love
Is whipped
at roadblocks*

Love must be kept hidden in the pantry at home

*In the twists and turns of this dead-end cold
Fire
is kept aglow
by burning songs and poems*

Do not peril by thinking

Such a strange time it is, my beloved

*He who beats at the door in the midst of the night
Has come to slay the light*

Light must be kept hidden in the pantry at home

*There the butchers
Presiding over the streets
with their bloodstained cleavers and chopping blocks*

Such a strange time it is, my beloved

*And surgically they place smiles on lips
and songs on mouths*

Joy must be kept hidden in the pantry at home

*Roasting Canaries
On a fire made of lilies and Jasmines*

Such a strange time it is, my beloved

*The devil drunk with conquest
Relishing a spread on the realms of our grief*

God must be kept hidden in the pantry at home

Shamlou's death was not referred to in the state-controlled media, but the BBC reports that 'tens of thousands of mourners packed the streets of Tehran for the funeral procession of Iran's greatest contemporary poet', chanting the following line from one of his poems as they walked along: 'I have never feared death ... My fear is to die in a land where the gravedigger's wage is higher than the price of an individual's freedom.'¹⁴⁰

Poetry can then in a sense be perceived as the most fragile art form; a single edit by the censor's pen is capable of completely devastating a poem. But there are many poets who have stood resolute and have refused to submit their work to the violation of censorship. Ms Razavian, who currently resides in London, is one such example. Writing about 'social issues, lack of freedom, the situation of women, the executions and stoning, cruelty and poverty,' she described her work to ARTICLE 19 as 'unpalatable for publication'. 'I didn't practice self-censorship which is exactly what brought matters to a halt,' she remarks, 'leading to my undesired exile from my homeland.'

Like many other poets, Ms Razavian's work was forced underground, where it lived and breathed, hidden from the eyes and ears of censors, until it was brought to the attention of the disciplinary committee at her university in the city of Isfahan. She denied all knowledge of ever having written poetry and that evening her father hid all her notebooks and poems, her musical instruments - which were at that time considered anti-Islamic - and any other signs of Westernisation, such as music videos and films. The authorities arrived that very night, but were unable to find any incriminating evidence.

'I was writing political-satirical poetry in the traditional style and had gathered quite a considerable underground audience for myself,' she informed ARTICLE 19. 'My poetry was being copied and xeroxed, being passed around from hand to hand.' Ms Razavian admits that it is difficult to get permission for the publication of poetry, but if you steer clear of contentious 'political, social or human rights issues and innuendoes, then you may get published.' 'If,' she adds, 'you pay the right people!'

One of the rising stars of Iranian poetry, Ziba Karbassi, has never had any of her work published in Iran.¹⁴¹ Nor has she ever made any attempt to achieve this end. Photocopies of her work can, however, be found on book stalls outside Iranian universities, where it is sold in secret, veiled in plain white jackets. 'Until not even one poem, until not even one line is censored,' she vows, 'I will not publish my poetry in Iran.' Like countless other Iranian poets, Ziba refuses to modify even a single word for censors and so, her work remains unpublished and publicly unheard. 'Words in poetry' she asserts 'are not a means.' They exist in their own right, rich with nuance and colour. To change even one, would be akin to 'removing a person's head and asking them to continue walking.'

She refers to her poetry as *Sher-e Nafas* or 'Poetry of the Breath.' Breathing and writing poetry are for Ms Karbassi, synonymous. 'Poetry is like breathing,' she says. 'It is the beating pulse of a poet. It is alive.' In the same way that if one were to restrict breathing, one would die. Ms Karbassi too swears that she would wilt if she were not free to express herself: 'One cannot breathe for ten minutes and then stop for ten and then continue breathing for another ten.' As far as she is concerned, there should be 'either no poetry or complete freedom' – censorship and poetry quite simply cannot co-exist.

Ms Karbassi's tale is not uncommon: after her stepfather was killed, she fled Iran with her mother and two sisters. It was at this point, aged 12 that she resolved to use poetry as a haven. 'I decided to build a house,' she says, 'so that there would be freedom for me. So

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* at 96.

¹⁴¹ Ziba Karbassi's quotes are from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

that I could bring in all the things and people that I love. I decided to make this house strong, to build it with language and to ban censorship.’ Poetry provides Ms Karbassi with asylum and language a sanctuary, where every word confirms both her existence and her right to express herself freely.

Adamant from the tender age of nine when she first began to write poetry that she would not surrender to self-censorship, Ms Karbassi’s work has become noted for its passion, or even as she herself admits, its ‘aggression’. This hostility is present in about a third of all her poetry, which she has pointedly dedicated to the plight of expression in Iran. In her own words it is ‘to give hope, to make people take action and to reassure them that they can be free.’ And until this liberation has been attained, her poetry will continue to resonate with the ‘voice of a ruined situation, of ruined people who don’t have the power to speak and are searching for freedom.’

Ziba

*this that I make black about my eyes
this that I rouge ruddy on my reddening lips
and this wild ivy of my hair that I plait in two
strands with their miniature tulips
of love*

*this that I’m wearing bright winter clothes
and they suit me
this that I paint my nails each with different colours
this that I love moonlight
that brings dreams
this that I love dreams
where they take me out of myself
this that I dance like a Roma dancer
swaying in the wild-why of the wind
and then more crazily still in the hi-hi of the hurricane
in the humour, in the
laughter*

in the language

*this that I am tall and as tall as all this that I must
achieve*

*and again this: that from the everything –
out of the nothing – that you have, I
want no part*

*and this: that the taller I am and the more I have
I have to love*

this that I say poem and then that love will faint

inside the words

*this that I know sudden stress is another name for
crisis*

*this that I suddenly become like a crazed one
and I strip in front of your eyes
and the poem becomes the craziness
of my crisis*

*and I become the storm stress of
the poem*

*and I make love all the time
make love with the poem*

*this that you've become gob-mouthed and round-eyed
just looking at me*

*this that your language stutters in the gap and water
dries in your throat and your
mouth stays wide o
and says:*

Ziba

*Zi-
ba*

*[Until what is beautiful
in my storm stress*

passes into silence]

8. MUSIC

The power of music has long been acknowledged, above all by those who have felt impelled to censor words or lyrics or to ban songs, albums and musicians outright. One of the earliest discussions of music censorship can be found in Plato's *Republic*, written in 375 B.C. In this treatise, Plato describes the eight modes of music – including tunes for 'drunkenness', 'softness' and 'idleness' – that he would abolish from his ideal state.¹⁴² Controversial lyrics and provocative rhythms have almost always been associated with sin and vice. Although the Koran does not condemn music per se, it claims that music can lead to a loss of reason,

¹⁴² M Korpe, O Reitov & M Cloonan, 'The Effectiveness of Music in Television Commercials', in *Music and Manipulation*, S Brown & U Volgsten (eds), (Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 239-264.

resulting in uncontrollable behaviour and an inflammation of passions.¹⁴³ One Hadith¹⁴⁴ states that, 'Listening to music leads to discord just as water leads to the growth of vegetation.'¹⁴⁵

For Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic revolution, much of the above rings true. Music, especially if Western in origin, serves only to kindle powerful and 'unclean' feelings. After the revolution, the hardliner newspaper *Keyhan* wrote:

Music is like a drug, whoever acquired the habit can no longer devote himself to important activities. It changes people to the point of yielding to vice or to preoccupations pertaining to the world of music alone. We must eliminate music because it means betraying our country and our youth. We must completely eliminate it.¹⁴⁶

Such thoughts led to a ban on all foreign and Iranian, classical and pop music, with Ayatollah Khomeini himself declaring that 'Music dulls the mind because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs. It destroys our youth who become poisoned by it.'¹⁴⁷

These words were spoken in 1979, but only a year ago on 19 December 2005, Iran's newly elected President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, made an announcement that echoed Ayatollah Khomeini's earlier sentiments. As head of the SCRC, President Ahmadinejad revived Ayatollah Khomeini's harsh cultural decree banning all Western music, including classical music, on state broadcast media. According to a statement on the SCRC's website, the ban would require the 'blocking of indecent and Western music from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting', promoting instead 'fine' Iranian music and revolutionary-era songs.¹⁴⁸

But for Iranians, there is little new in the ban, which quite simply sounds like the same old tune being sung all over again. After all, Western music has been forbidden in Iran since the beginning of the revolution. Some, nevertheless, fear that the ban signals a wider cultural clampdown, which has been in effect since President Ahmadinejad's election. Although the resolution affects only state-run television and radio, many are concerned that the ban is the first step to further restrictions, such as those that were enforced during the early days of the revolution.

During this period, when revolutionary fervour was at its peak, there was an embargo on all music apart from revolutionary and religious songs. 'The payment of musicians was illegal in terms of religious law', says the Iranian composer Roshanravan. 'The very act of signing a document mentioning the word "music" was considered a sin.'¹⁴⁹ Revolutionary Guards would ransack houses to find and destroy musical instruments, which had been pronounced forbidden. Their sale and purchase were permitted years later in 1989, if for a 'licit purpose'.¹⁵⁰ Cars during this time were also stopped and raided by police who searched

¹⁴³ A Youssefzadeh, 'Singing in a Theocracy: Female Musicians in Iran,' in *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, M Korpe (ed.), (London: Zed Books, 2004), 129.

¹⁴⁴ The Hadiths are the traditions relating to the words and deeds of the prophet Mohammad.

¹⁴⁵ Youssefzadeh, note 3 above at 40.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* at 38.

¹⁴⁷ I Hewett, 'First Person Singular: Why Iran's Ban is a Tribute to the Power of Music', *The Telegraph*, 28 January 2006,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2006/01/28/bafps28.xml&sSheet=/arts/2006/01/28/ixart1eft.html>.

¹⁴⁸ 'Iran Declares Ban on Western Music', *The Guardian*, 20 December 2005,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,1671496,00.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Youssefzadeh, note 3 above at 38.

¹⁵⁰ Youssefzadeh, note 143 above at 131.

for and destroyed Western music tapes. Listeners of these tapes faced the possibility of arrest.

Once this initial zeal began to wane, the ban on traditional folk music was lifted and light classical music began to creep back onto radio and television. This was followed by Western music being played in the background of television programmes, albeit without its lyrics. These days in Iran much has changed and many of these methods of suppression have been abandoned. Musical instruments can be freely purchased and most Western music is available through bootleg videos and DVDs, satellite and via the Internet; a development unlikely to be affected by the directive. 'Mr Ahmadinejad maybe doesn't know society well enough...especially among the youth,' says Babak Riahipour, a member of a heavy metal group. 'We can still get music we would like to listen to from somewhere else. We can get it from the Internet, we can get it on Tehran's big black market, anywhere.'¹⁵¹

For other Iranians, new restrictions such as the ban on Western music are so periodically announced that they have begun to carry little weight, especially as most are not enforced. In the past, the sale of solo female artists and satellite dishes have been banned, but their prohibition has only been sporadically upheld. Ultimately for many, the resolution will prove difficult to implement and music aficionados in Tehran are continuing to sell, buy and listen to music as before. 'This President speaks as if he is living in the Stone Age,' said one music enthusiast. 'This man has to understand that he can't tell the people what to listen to and what not to listen to.'¹⁵² 'Don't take this man (Ahmadinejad) seriously,' scoffed another teenager, driving in Tehran with the Eagles' 'Hotel California' blaring from his car speakers.¹⁵³

In an interview with ARTICLE 19, Nassir Mashkouri, the editor of *Zirzamin*, an alternative and underground on-line music magazine, confirms that in Tehran, the ban has not made any difference.¹⁵⁴ 'All CD shops are still selling foreign music and are covered in posters of foreign musicians such as Nirvana, Bob Marley and The Doors, even on the outside,' said Mr Mashkouri. 'Everything was there, there wasn't any change ... Maybe for a while people who were selling these items were careful, but no there hasn't been any real change ... It is too difficult to change things now, how could they?' 'They would have to start another revolution!' he says, adding, 'It wouldn't be beneficial to them to create an uproar about this ... Three generations have passed since the revolution, they haven't seen the revolution or the war and they want to move forwards.'

Mr Mashkouri's magazine, *Zirzamin*, is a tribute to rock music in Iran, which has like many other genres of music been forced underground. He muses that in Iran, 'where there are so many restrictions, even pop music has become underground.' It should be noted though that Iranian rock music is different to its Western equivalent as it lacks the 'frustration, distress, anger, bitterness and rebellion' that exists in Western rock. Attempts to elude censors have rendered rock music symbolic rather than defiant and outspoken.

In stark contrast, is the direction in which rap music has developed. Unlike rock music, Mr Mashkouri says, 'Hip hop has progressed more'. 'Not in terms of technique ... but in terms of expression,' he continues. 'The words that they speak are very radical. They speak of taboos such as sex and drugs ... they are much more rebellious than those involved

¹⁵¹ 'Young Iranians Shrug off Music Ban', *NewsMax*, 21 Dec 2001, <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2005/12/21/101622.shtml>.

¹⁵² 'Iran Music Ban Falls on Deaf Ears', *ABC Local*, 20 Dec 2005, <http://abclocal.go.com/wpvi/story?section=entertainment&id=3742620>.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Nassir Mashkouri's words are taken from an interview with ARTICLE 19 conducted in Farsi and have been translated by the author.

in rock music.’ ‘Rock music is much more traditional,’ he says, adding, ‘If our rockers would dare to speak the words that rappers do, rock would evolve much more quickly.’

Evidence of this outspokenness is the recent song by the rap outfit *Persian Princes* who wrote a song for 18-year-old Nazanin, a girl sentenced to death in January 2006, for murder.¹⁵⁵ Nazanin reportedly admitted fatally stabbing one of three men who attempted to rape her and her 16-year-old niece in a park in Tehran in March 2005. Topics such as Nazanin’s case tend to be taboo in Iran, especially if they are spoken of in a manner which is critical of the state.

In early 2006, rap group *Dalu*’s new album was banned by the MCIG for being too Western.¹⁵⁶ Its lyrics are a razor-sharp condemnation of incompetence in economic affairs, of the Islamic Republic’s leading clerics and their unfashionable garb. Similarly banned are Rap duo *AZ* and *Sina-ti* who claim to be the ‘voice of the youth’.¹⁵⁷ ‘You can’t make a career at music in Iran unless you are willing to compromise,’ says *AZ*. ‘Maybe it’s good that the best music is all underground. It keeps us on the edge. It keeps us fresh.’ The duo’s lyrics speak of disillusionment and the longing for greater freedom:

*We must get together and be united against our enemies.
Why are freedom’s hands tied?
Why are we so disappointed?
That’s enough.
We are rapping because we are tired
of the system.
We are looking for
freedom.*

Yet there is one rapper, dubbed the ‘Dapper Rapper’ for his stylish suits, who is Iran’s only official rapper.¹⁵⁸ A far cry from the ghettos of the Bronx, Shahkar Binesh-Pajouh is a lecturer with a doctorate in urban planning, who blends rap music with Persian classical poetry to condemn poverty, unemployment and other social issues. In spite of Mr Binesh-Pajouh’s deeply conservative message, he too spent four years struggling with the MCIG to obtain permission for his album. Getting approval from the censors was a prolonged affair and was only granted after six songs from his original ten were deleted and inappropriate lyrics changed. ‘It kills you as an artist,’ he says. Furthermore, following the release of his album, officials imposed a two-year ban on his live acts after zealous vigilantes attacked one of his concerts.

For many, President Ahmadinejad’s decree is just one of a multitude of restrictions, currently suffocating musical expression. In an interview with ARTICLE 19, Tehran-based thrash metal band *Explode* commented, ‘the situation is so bad that I can’t think that we can sink deeper,’ before adding, ‘I don’t know, at least I think we can’t sink any deeper!!’ According to Shadi Vatanparast, a writer on the Iranian web-magazine *TehranAvenue.com*, ‘Music can be considered the most vulnerable and problematic art form in the Iranian

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.persianhiphop.com/>

¹⁵⁶ Freemuse, ‘Forbidden Album Becomes a Hit’, 3 March 2006, <http://www.freemuse.org/sw12551.asp>.

¹⁵⁷ B Murphy, ‘Rap in Iran: The Mullahs Don’t Like It’, 24 August 2006, <http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/08/27iranrap.html>.

¹⁵⁸ F Harrison, ‘Iran’s Self-Styled Rapping Aristocrat’, *BBC News*, 14 December 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4096141.stm.

history.’¹⁵⁹ ‘The state,’ she continues, ‘has always tried to control artistic production and music is one of the more effective ways of directing desires.’

As with all other art forms, Ms Vatanparast writes that one of the greatest obstacles facing musicians is the barrier of bureaucracy with which they are faced. For any musician who wishes to play music, release a CD, arrange a concert, or even teach, permission is required from the MCIG who are responsible for the following:¹⁶⁰

1. Protection and support of music.
2. Guidance and orientation – musicians must be guided to preserve music and safeguard the authenticity of the culture, especially native music.
3. Supervision and control – supervision must ‘preserve the authentic and ancient culture of our country.’ This includes:
 - a. Control of recorded music – issuing permits for distribution. This also applies for recorded poetry which must be vetted to ensure that it does not offend public sensibilities. Love poems or poems of despair are not for example deemed appropriate.
 - b. Permits for music teaching – the aspirant must have a degree in music, or be examined by a commission from the MCIG. The proposed teaching space must be adequate (50-60m). Islamic standards must also be observed at all times, which means that women can only be taught by women. Music concerts require permits.
 - c. Organisation of musical events – these usually take place within the framework of a religious ceremony.

Musicians must submit both their music and their lyrics to three councils: the Lyric Council, the Music Council and the Cultural Council. ‘Rejection,’ according to Freemuse, an NGO dedicated to music censorship, ‘is the norm’.¹⁶¹ The list of what is forbidden is lengthy and fastidious. Prohibited are inappropriate lyrics, especially those that declare love for anyone but Allah, grammatical errors, solo female singers, shaved heads, improper sense of style, too many rifts on electrical guitars and excessive stage movements.¹⁶² This latter proviso it should be highlighted, is, however, a development from the early years, when band members were required to play sitting down.¹⁶³ Even though today the band is permitted to stand, those in the audience must still remain seated. According to a BBC correspondent, ‘Dancing, even moving energetically in your seat – is forbidden.’¹⁶⁴ Mr Riahipour describes his audience members as ‘headbanging while sitting’.¹⁶⁵

Releasing albums is another particularly tricky affair, especially if the music is accompanied by lyrics. ‘If there are lyrics the situation becomes much harder,’ says Mr Mashkouri. ‘Firstly they will check the lyrics to see if the words are social or political or they give their opinions and question why there is a rhyme here and not there. They will go to such lengths. It is not just the political, but the technical side that they are also critical of.’

But even this is not always the case. Musician Norik Misakian’s instrumental album entitled, ‘Trails of the Soul’, was banned by the MCIG, who claimed the music was overly

¹⁵⁹ Freemuse, ‘The Most Problematic Art Form in Iran’, 21 Oct 2004, <http://www.freemuse.org/sw9778.asp>.

¹⁶⁰ Youssefzadeh, note 3 above at 42-49.

¹⁶¹ ‘World Premiere of Film about Music Censorship in Iran’, 4 May 2006, <http://www.freemuse.org/sw13558.asp>.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ S Peterson, ‘Iranian Musicians Try to Hit the Right Note’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 Oct 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1003/p04s01-wome.html>.

¹⁶⁴ M Eeles, ‘Fresh Iranian Bands Ready to Rock’, *BBC News*, 9 February 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3471841.stm.

¹⁶⁵ Peterson, note 163.

reminiscent of Western rock, a product of drug addicts. 'We are swimming against the tide and we anticipate that it might be impossible,' said Mr Misakian.¹⁶⁶ 'There are so many problems in trying to gain permission to release music and very often bands give up. But we won't give up. What's important for us isn't the financial issues but going beyond the boundaries and ensuring the album is available in music shops.'

In a bid to have their music heard most musicians have turned to the Internet as an outlet for the distribution of their material. *Explode* confirm that as 'there's near to none chance to release a metal album officially here,' they have instead decided to record their album in their home studio and release it as an underground album on their website. In 2002, TehranAvenue.com launched an on-line music competition to discover new Iranian talent within the underground scene. 'Most of these bands are underground, with little chance of getting their work released, but their number is rising,' said the website's founder Sohrab Mahdavi. 'It makes sense. The young generation is with us. Around 70% of Iran's population is under the age of 35 and so many of them are inclined towards rock music.'¹⁶⁷

Some musicians in Iran are prepared to go to even greater lengths to have their music heard. They arrange secret concerts in ad hoc locations such as private homes or underground car parks, risking punishment if caught. 'The concerts are moved to small halls of music institutes and underground places,' says *Explode*. 'Even schools!! So we have some concerts in a couple of months, but they're pretty underground.' In a country where obtaining permission for a concert has become virtually impossible, musicians have consequently resorted to exploring every possible avenue so that their music can be heard. Concerts were much freer in President Khatami's time and according to Mr Mashkouri, '99% were given permission.' Although, he adds, 'Sometimes the sound would be stopped if the music was too aggressive or if they sung something which they shouldn't have.' Worse still, occasionally, 'at the end of the show a mob would arrive and begin to destroy things.' Since President Ahmadinejad's election, however, 'concerts are completely banned, apart from in one or two places ... not that they are illegal, they simply won't be granted permission.'

But it is, unsurprisingly, women who face the greatest obstacles in this sphere of art. Music is on the whole deemed incompatible with the principles of modesty espoused by Islam, because of 'its corrupting influences on the sexes distracting them from their real duties: to pray and to praise Allah' – a property only heightened by women.¹⁶⁸

Before the twentieth century, a woman's voice could only be heard by women or men in her immediate family circle. If it was necessary to converse with other men, women would conceal their voices or clap their hands while speaking. This form of censorship had its roots in the belief that a woman's voice makes 'one think of other things than Allah'.¹⁶⁹ The prophet Mohammad himself advised men to steer clear of *malahi* (forbidden pleasures) such as music, women and wine.¹⁷⁰ It is no wonder then that a fusion of two of these forbidden pleasures – women and music – is considered to be such a lethal combination.

In 1997, all female entertainment was banned in Iran, unless for a female-only audience. Women could only sing in the company of men if they were part of a choir, so that no lone voice could be distinguished from the others. For singer Mahsa Vahdat, 'it is

¹⁶⁶ R Tait, 'Iran's "Culturally Inappropriate" Rock Hopefuls Struggle to be Heard', 23 August 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,12858,1554334,00.html>.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Freemuse, E Fenn, 'Women and Music Censorship – Past to Present', <http://freemuse.inforce.dk/graphics/Publications/PDF/cnrship-in-fem-music.pdf>.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Youssefzadeh, note 3 above at 129.

hilarious and this method of restricting people and telling them that you can only sing for women is humiliating.’¹⁷¹ ‘Women’s voice,’ she says, ‘is actually like a colour, it’s a kind of possibility and has its own special capabilities.’ ‘Omitting this voice,’ she continues, ‘is in reality eliminating a possibility and has caused the withering away of considerable talents. Also, the loss of women’s voice has harmed the Iranian music treasure.’

Those living in exile, such as singer Gissoo Shakeri, nevertheless, continue to sing on behalf of those who cannot in Iran. Ms Shakeri related to ARTICLE 19 that since her departure from Iran she has not been ‘in the condition to create musically with complete freedom’ as an ‘important part of my mind is preoccupied with the affairs and problems of the Iranian people.’ As an exiled artist, she sees herself as shouldering a responsibility for those she has left behind. And so, ‘without the pressures of the state,’ she says, ‘I can use music and song to convey the shouts, the expression and the pains of the people, especially the women from my country who are struggling under great and unasked for pressures.’

Likewise, there are many musicians in Iran who refuse to be deterred by censorship and who continue their struggle to be heard. In the words of *Explode*, ‘All in all it’s still unofficial and underground. There’s no album releases. No money included, no sponsors. We’re doing it for the love of music. It’s a passion in our musicians’ blood.’

9. DANCE

For the much celebrated Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlou, ‘the dance-like patterns of Persian rugs have their origin in a national desire for dance and music which Islam has suppressed.’¹⁷² Unlike other art forms, which were placed under the jurisdiction of the SCRC, dance did not have such a fortunate – if such a word can be used – fate. It was instead banned outright. According to the tenets of the Cultural Revolution, dance was perverse, immoral and a sin.¹⁷³ The most important dance institutions, The National Ballet Company and The *Mahalli* Troupe of Folk, were dissolved and most of its members immigrated to different countries.¹⁷⁴ Hundreds of other dancers followed the mass exodus that took place during these early revolutionary years. Included in this prohibition was the mystical dance of the Sufis, which adherents believe facilitates their closeness to God. ‘Dancing in any form,’ says Nima Kiann, a dancer who left Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, ‘classical, contemporary, mystic or folklore was banned and those who tried to practice were arrested and punished according to *Sharia* laws.’

According to Mr Kiann, Mr Khatami’s presidency was accompanied by a relaxation of some of the restrictions previously imposed on dance. Although dancing is still prohibited, the ban on some genres of dancing, such as folk, have been annulled; particularly important when considering the multiethnic fabric of Iranian society. These activities have, however, been dubbed *harekat-e mozoon* (harmonic movements), with use of the term ‘dance’ and hence the true nature of this pursuit, still being avoided.

¹⁷¹ N Taqizadeh, ‘Singing in the Absence of Others’, *Tehran Avenue*, Dec 2002,

<http://www.tehranavenue.com/article.php?id=253>.

¹⁷² A Karimi-Hakak, ‘A Well amid the Waste: An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu’, <http://shamlu.com/Shamlu-1.doc>, 1.

¹⁷³ N Kiann, ‘The Era of Pahlavi and Modernisation of Iranian Culture and Arts’, <http://www.artira.com/nimakiann/history/contemporary.html>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

During this time, constraints on teaching, albeit in single sex environments, have also become more lenient. Professional dance as an art form is nevertheless still excluded on a large scale from Iranian society.¹⁷⁵ The poor quality of dance activities being presented in Iran has, according to Mr Kiann, ‘done more harm to the art form than contributing to its development’. The absence of an established teaching system within the country or any earnest governmental endeavour to educate the public has instead resulted in a ‘severe misunderstanding of dance’ as an art form.

But such is the nature of dance that it can never be truly banned. Unlike writers, filmmakers or painters who can have their tools taken away, dancers can, at least in theory, dance whenever they so wish. By forbidding dance, legislators have forced it out of the public and into the private sphere. Despite its prohibition, dancing occurs at private gatherings such as weddings and parties, and according to one source, even at the few underground dance clubs in Tehran.¹⁷⁶ Dancing has, however, continued to be frowned upon by the clergy, especially if it is in the presence of the opposite sex and those found committing this outlawed act risk punishment.

10. CONCLUSION

In a land where paradoxes abound, the division that exists between the interior and exterior, between the private and public spheres is just one of many. The separation of these domains has created a dualism that has become inherent in Iranian culture and a defining feature of most artistic endeavours in Iran. In the outside world, the sense of social decorum must be upheld with utmost vigour. In the outside world, women wear the *hejab*. In the outside world, art, whether painting or poetry, is communicated through a veil of abstraction as artists attempt to elude the critical eye of censors.

But once indoors, veils can be discarded, rap, rock and pop can be blasted from stereos, hips can sway, banned poetry can be recited, prohibited literature read, forbidden films watched and art of any kind, can adorn the walls. But even these private expressions are not immune from the regime’s watchful eye. Enforcement of moral standards is assumed by the community at large, further constraining the private sphere of expression.

The censorship of art, including the current, ultraconservative government’s clampdown on any hint of Western influences is, on the whole, considered to be tremendously damaging to the evolution of art. Penalties are so extreme that they exert a serious ‘chilling’ effect on free expression. Artists self-censor in fear of risking harassment, arrest, flogging, or worse still, imprisonment.

Censorship by authorities, compounded by artists’ own self-censorship, has led to artistic expression in Iran suffering greatly. According to the prominent artist Gholamhossein Nami, although artistic expression is couched within a social context, the essence of artistic expression is universal. Isolation can only lead to its withering: ‘Those who profess to keep out all the winds that blow from the west, well these people are depriving our art from a universal language and means of expression.’¹⁷⁷

Indeed, in today’s world, art cannot be kept within strict boundaries as the flow of information and ideas continue to cross borders with ever-increasing ease, facilitated above

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *NewsMax*, Note 151.

¹⁷⁷ Mostyn, note 19 above at 24.

all by the Internet. The vestiges of otherness that this exchange leaves behind have led to a hybridization and a more multicultural world consciousness. Iran too, try as it may to exclude these stimuli, has instead nurtured a youth that eagerly seeks alternative channels for its expression and an ironic fascination with Western, especially American culture. The burgeoning rap scene in Iran is testament to the allure of all things American, which are prohibited in the country.

The alleged disparities that exist between these two worlds represent the ‘two faces of humanity’s single, common experience’, according to Iranian artist Daryush Shayegan.¹⁷⁸ Art, he argues, is fundamentally universal at heart and its pulse maintained by dialogue with ‘elsewhere’, whether this be at a local, national or international level. It is perhaps this universality that is at the core of the right to free expression.

Disturbingly, control of the arts in Iran is a multi-layered affair, with artists facing a long sequence of hurdles, designed to censor and suppress artistic endeavours at every turn, to filter art that is not deemed consistent with ‘Islamic values’. But as we have seen, there is no uniformity in the interpretation of ‘Islamic values’ and art that has been rejected by conservatives can be resurrected under the authority of reformists. Such is the schizophrenic nature of censorship in Iran. Perhaps most concerning, however, is the extent of censorship in Iran, which has by all accounts, far surpassed governmental control. Iranians themselves have become the arbiters of morality and police the views which challenge the status quo, and as long as they continue to do so, the regime will have achieved its aim.

10.1 Recommendations:

1. Vigilante violence against artists must cease in Iran

International law places the Islamic Republic of Iran under an obligation to take effective measures to stop violence by non-state actors that prevents its citizens from exercising their right to freedom of expression. All Vigilante attacks or acts of intimidations against artists should be investigated promptly, thoroughly and independently, and those responsible brought to justice. Authorities at the highest levels of government should publicly denounce actions by vigilante groups.

2. Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Information Guidance (MCIG) should immediately cease its practice of prior censorship of artistic works

The practice of prior censorship by the MCIG is entrenched through the system of licensing and pre-approval of proposed artistic works. Such practices exert an undue ‘chilling’ effect on freedom of expression and greatly encourage the practice of self-censorship, an insidious form of censorship which affects an even greater range of content than the formal censorship system.

3. Any system of restrictions on freedom of expression should, in accordance with universal human rights norms, be provided by law, necessary to protect a legitimate aim, transparent and accountable, and subject to independent review

¹⁷⁸ Issa, Pakbaz & Shayegan, note 46 above at 2.

Restrictions on artistic expression should be imposed only after artistic works have been made public. The criteria for review should be clearly stipulated in law and be consistent with the requirements of Article 19 of the *International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). Where restrictions are imposed, these should be accompanied by written reasons, which are conveyed to the artist. Furthermore, restrictions should be subject to review by an independent body to ensure conformity with the law.

Any system of restrictions based on religion, including Islamic values, should conform to universal human rights norms. Restrictions should not be imposed merely on the ground that something is 'offensive' to the majority of public opinion. As a signatory to the ICCPR, the Islamic Republic of Iran is under a legal obligation to ensure that it protects and promotes the individual rights contained therein, including when maintaining respect for religion and public morals.

- 4. The Iranian government should cease using the state-controlled media to launch vilification campaigns against those artists whose reputations it wishes to tarnish.**
- 5. All existing laws and other restrictions on freedom of expression should be reviewed immediately and amended to bring them into line with international standards**

The Iranian government should immediately release all artists and publishers who have been detained or imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression through art. Charges against others should be reviewed and dropped where they do not conform to international standards.

The following existing restrictions on freedom of expression should be revoked:

- the ban on dance as a means of expression;
- the ban on solo female singers;
- the October 2005 decree for the 'blocking of indecent and Western music from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting'; and
- the October 2005 decree for banning all foreign films that promote 'secular, feminist, liberal or nihilist ideas'.

11. List of Interviewees

Arash Sahemi, Filmmaker

Explode, Thrash-metal band

Farah Ashtiani, Photographer

Gissoo Shakeri, Singer

Hadi Khorsandi, Satirist

Majid Naficy, Poet

Maryam Hashemi, Artist

Massoud Behnoud, Journalist

Mohammad Sefryan, Writer

Nader Davoodi, Photographer

Nassir Mashkouri, Musician

Nima Kiann, Dancer

Parvaneh Soltani, Film critic and playwright

Reza Baraheni, Poet, novelist and literary critic

Robab Moheb, Poet

Sam Vaseghi (Dr), Poet, playwright and writer

Shadi Ghadirian, Photographer

Shirin Razavian, Poet

Soudabeh Ardavan, Artist

Vahid Evazzadeh, Playwright

Ziba KARBASSI, Poet



ARTICLE 19 takes its name and purpose from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

ARTICLE 19's mission statement:

ARTICLE 19 promotes, protects and develops freedom of expression, including access to information and the means of communication. We do this through advocacy, standard-setting, campaigns, research, litigation and the building of partnerships. We engage global, regional and State institutions, as well as the private sector, in critical dialogue and hold them accountable for the implementation of international standards.

ARTICLE 19 seeks to achieve its mission by:

- strengthening the legal, institutional and policy frameworks for freedom of expression and access to information at the global, regional and national levels, including through the development of legal standards;
- increasing global, regional and national awareness and support for such initiatives;
- engaging with civil society actors to build global, regional and national capacities to monitor and shape the policies and actions of governments, corporate actors, professional groups and multilateral institutions with regard to freedom of expression and access to information;
- promoting broader popular participation by all citizens in public affairs and decision-making at the global, regional and national levels through the promotion of free expression and access to information; and
- applying a free speech analysis to all aspects of people's lives including public health, poverty, the environment and issues of social exclusion.

ARTICLE 19 is a non-governmental, charitable organisation (UK Charity No. 327421). For more information please contact us at:

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