The following are excerpt from Chapter 2 of the book, *Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan, Duke 2020.* Seen as a "window" for surveillance and data collection, and an effective venue for the dissemination of neoliberal discourses of democracy and freedom, in the first decade of the new millennium Weblogistan (the Iranian blogosphere) attracted immense attention from neoconservative think tanks and liberalizing regimes. The book argues that while enabling resistance and political mobilizations as elements of transnational Iranian civil society, in its heyday Weblogistan was inevitably intertwined with the *politics of rightful killing*: a form of politics that concerns not only the community of Iranian bloggers in cyberspace but also the offline lives of the Iranian population at large. The politics of rightful killing explains the contemporary political situation where those, such as the "people of Iran," whose rights and protection are presented as the raison d'être of war, are sanctioned to death and therefore live a pending death exactly because of those rights.

As I discuss in the book, the condensation of nationalist and neoliberal discourses in Weblogistan and performances of democratic Iranian-ness during the "war on terror" sought to normalize particular sexed and gendered subjectivities as exceptional digital Iranian citizens in online and offline encounters. The most representable (in mainstream media) Iranian bloggers as neoliberal self-entrepreneurs imagined a democratic Iranian-ness that drew its force from hegemonic nationalist ideals, while aspiring to an exceptional citizenship that valorized secular and liberal freedom achieved through individualism, self-interest, and participation in rehearsals of "democracy" in the realm of cyber civil society.

It was in the context of internet democratization projects that Weblogistan became a site of the production and normalization of digital citizens who "practiced democracy" and

imagined a desired future. Weblogistan became the virtual laboratory where the competing

discourses of nationalism and neoliberalism, and the affective registers of belonging and

desire, convened to produce and normalize gendered exceptional citizens in a phantasmic

shuttling between a glorious, immemorial past and a democratic future. Notwithstanding

the aspirations of the desiring Iranian digital citizens, I argue in the book that the

possibility of exceptional citizenship is foreclosed, as risk inevitably traverses Iranian

bodies inasmuch as they belong to a population that is subjected to the politics of rightful

killing: the politics of death in relationship to an unstable life that is at once imbued with

and stripped of liberal universal rights. Put differently, Iranians who aspire to exceptional

citizenship are constantly shuttling between rightfulness and rightlessness, as the looming

fear of the Middle Eastern "terrorist" travels through contagion (to borrow from Puar),

implicating all Iranians and marking them "risky citizens." The risky citizen in the digital

realm, in other words, is a self-responsible individual, apt for democratization through bio-

political and ethico-political practices that seek to normalize the (currently undemocratic)

population according to the ideals of liberal democracy. However, unlike the exceptional

citizen who is folded into life, this unstable figure who simultaneously maintains a desire

for liberal democracy and a sense of belonging to a population that embodies a pending

threat to the security of the "international community" can become disposable at any given

moment.

As a part of the transnational Iranian civil society, Weblogistan was a new site

where heated debates about Iranian politics took place among internet-savvy Iranians in

Iran and its diaspora. These debates highlighted the gendered, sexed, and racial exclusions

of a futurity that was imagined through rehearsals of democracy and freedom in

Weblogistan. In chapter 2, "Civil Society(*jaame'e-ye madani*), Soccer, and Gendered Politics in Weblogistan: The 2005 Presidential Election," I discuss some of these debates. In particular, I explore the notion of civil society in the Iranian political context and argue that while Iranian cyberspace (including blogs) has expanded transnational Iranian civil society by enabling faster communication between a certain group of middle-class Iranians in Iran and their counterparts in diaspora, the Iranian civil society is neither new nor a gift granted by internet technologies. To consider Weblogistan as an element of transnational Iranian civil society is not intended to celebrate civil society as a site of consensus and debate or to glorify the internet as an emancipatory technology. On the contrary, I show that Weblogistan is where gendered inequalities surface and where women are excluded from the realm of "proper politics." The online and offline reactions to women bloggers who voted in the presidential election and the encounters among women activists/bloggers, reformist men, and secular diaspora opposition groups and individuals demonstrate how blogger women activists were often caught between discourses of liberation that legitimized imperialism and nationalist discourses that used women as markers of national pride.

(Excerpt from Chapter 2-- Civil Society, Soccer, and Gendered Politics in Weblogistan)

The 2005 Presidential Election

In June 2005 a group of Iranian Toronto residents, many of whom were bloggers, rented a bus to go to the Iranian Embassy in Ottawa to vote in the Iranian presidential elections. Upon arriving at the embassy, they were met by a demonstration by Iranian opposition groups who perceived participation in the elections as a sign of approval of the Iranian Islamic state. As Ava, a feminist blogger who had traveled to the embassy, told me, "When I got off the bus, I was attacked verbally by the royalists and some old-school leftists (*chap-e ghadeemee*). In particular, one of my classmates [the author of a blog in English] called my name and shouted, "*baa roosari bee roosari khaak-toosari*" ("with or without hijab, you are pathetic"). Ava (who does not wear the hijab) pointed to the double standard in which male voters were not shamed and in which even women protesters (many of whom self-identified feminists) shamed women voters for being "brainwashed by the Iranian regime." Dismayed by the inconsistency of Iranian secular liberal feminists in diaspora, Ava shrugged her shoulders and said with a sarcastic tone, "*Mardaa ham keh khob tabi'atan mardan*!" ("Of course, [to them] men are men, naturally!") To Ava, it was hypocritical that liberal secular opposition to the Islamic Republic enshrined voting as a right and

responsibility of modern citizens and as a marker of women's liberation, except when it came to voting in the Iranian presidential elections.

The royalist and antireform opposition groups' extreme rejection of the postrevolutionary Iranian state is informed by an understanding of "civil society" as a purely oppositional antistate formation. This wholesale rejection or phobia of the state—what Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) has called the "inflationary" critique of the state—involves the assumption of "the intrinsic power of the state in relation to its object-target, civil society" (187). The Iranian opposition groups that completely reject reform often conflate the reformists with the "regime" while recognizing (and subsequently appropriating) as the "will of the people" (where people are assumed to stand in opposition to the Islamic state) only particular moments of contestation by activists and scholars in Iran and its diaspora. In contrast, the processes of negotiation and reform within the state are seen as contaminated by the state's oppressive nature and thus are excluded from the fantasy of a pure civil society. This emphasis on "the people," which is indeed a part of the liberal political project, has gained currency in Iran in the post-Khatami era, where "the people" (and not necessarily the homeland) have become the fetish for the opposition groups in exile. As Benedetto Fontana has argued, "However different in intellectual content and in political-ideological direction, modern interpretations of liberalism share a common political/historical substratum, as well as a consistent set of interrelated political/intellectual ideas. This substratum is the emergence of 'the people'—or the 'masses'—in history as a force in politics" (2006, 59). The valorization of civil society as the realm of unified opposition to a homogenously oppressive state not only discounts the violent conflicts and exclusions within civil society but also aggrandizes its subversive

and antistate potentials. Furthermore, what opposition groups uncritically call "the regime"

is actually a fragmented and dynamic formation that, at times, relies on civil society for its

disciplinary and regulatory work, and that is always characterized by contradiction and

internal conflict.[1] Along with other informal enclaves, the fissures within state have

enabled spaces in which contestation and reform have become possible.[2] However, most

academic accounts that are critical of the Iranian state portray Iranian civil society as

independent and in opposition to the state (e.g., Alavi 2004; Amir-Ebrahimi 2004

Boroumand 2007; Milani 2005). These discussions focus on the women's movement, the

student movement, and the labor movement as elements of a growing civil society that

stands against an Iranian state that is always already imagined to be repressive, uniform,

and unchanging.

By eliding the socioeconomic and political factors that led to the 2005 victory of

Mahmood Ahmadinejad after two terms of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami,

these critics represent the 2005 election as staged and utterly undemocratic, while

portraying different movements in Iran as symbols of a newly formed civil society that is in

natural opposition to the state and in need of support by "democratic" states. In addition,

when the 2009 reelection of Ahmadinejad was met with charges of election fraud and

street protests by proponents of the reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, some

diaspora opposition groups opportunistically hijacked the Green movement for their own

political agenda. Wary of this appropriation, many reformists inside and outside of Iran

emphasized that they do not need the support of "first-world" states and "regime-change"

advocates. Mousavi himself warned against malicious appropriation, emphasizing that

protecting the establishment (*nezaam*) and fighting for justice and the rule of law should

be the goal of his supporters. And Mohsen Kadivar, the Iranian reformist cleric who was previously jailed in Iran, told a reporter that "we don't need any special support from you. The green movement for democracy and liberty in Iran is independent and we don't need anything from the foreigners. We should get democracy ourselves."[3]

There was a proliferation of statements and petitions to support the Iranian civil society in the name of defending the rights of "the Iranian people." For many disapora Iranians who worked at think tanks, the internet became a site where the Iranian people could practice democracy. For example, as Ladan Boroumand (2007, 74) wrote, "The core of the new movement consists of people between the ages of 25 and 45. They are truly a post-revolutionary generation; most were children or not even born as of 1979. Their numbers are enormous given Iran's vast 'youth bulge.' They lack their parents' predilections for Islamism, nationalism, or radical leftism; their commitments are to human rights and nonviolence, with not much ideological baggage beyond that. They feel connected to the world through media such as the Internet, and this bolsters their advocacy of civil rights."[4] If civil society connoted progress, democracy, and freedom in these accounts, the internet was not only the index but also the vehicle for achieving civil society, and Weblogistan was the representative of the opposition to a unified "regime" (Alavi 2005; Boroumand 2007).

[...]

Women Bloggers and the Iranian Presidential Election

As is usually the case in the months preceding a presidential election in Iran, the 2005 election brought increased social freedoms and provided the opportunity for feminists to put pressure on candidates to advance women's rights. Some of the significant events that many feminist bloggers discussed during the 2005 election included the meeting of a group of women's-rights advocates with the presidential candidates, a sit-in by a group of feminists in front of the University of Tehran, and the entrance of a group of women and women's-rights activists to Azadi Stadium to watch a men's soccer match (at which women are usually not allowed).

[…]

Civil Society and Its Discontents: Half of Freedom

On June 9, 2005, shortly before the presidential election, a group of women challenged the ban prohibiting women from attending men's soccer games in Iran. After four hours of waiting behind the doors of *stadium-e Azadi* (Freedom Stadium) for the Iran-Bahrain match and shouting slogans such as "My share, woman's share, half of freedom," and "shame, shame!" ("*khejaalat, khejaalat!*"), women pushed through the gates behind the bus that transported the national team. Finally, the reformist candidate, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, who at the time was the sports minister in President Khatami's cabinet, allowed women to

enter and sit in the VIP section of the stadium, where they would not be harassed by male

soccer fans. Although Mehralizadeh attempted to use this event to portray himself as

sympathetic to women's rights, most of the women bloggers who reported about this

incident in Weblogistan were supporters of the reformist candidate, Mostafa Moeen. Aware

of Mehralizadeh's political motivations and the appropriation of women's rights by a

candidate who had otherwise not shown support for women's rights, Parastoo Dokouhaki,

a feminist blogger and journalist, critiqued the women who were using the protest to shout

pro-Mehralizadeh slogans: "I forgot to say that a large number of women in the stadium

came with Mehralizadeh's invitation. They were shouting slogans in his support and

campaigning for him. It wasn't a pleasant move at all. It was offensive."[30]

Dokouhaki was not the only blogger who took issue with the appropriation of

women's rights by politicians. Fereshteh Ghazi, another feminist blogger and journalist,

was also enraged that candidates were appropriating women's causes for their electoral

agendas: "In the heat of the elections, it is as if everyone is appropriating any movement in

favor of their candidates."[31] Rejecting the charges that women who entered the stadium

were pawns of presidential candidates, a feminist blogger and reformist journalist, Geeso

Faghfoori, recounted the events at the stadium:

<EXT>We entered the Freedom stadium. We watched the second half of the

Iran-Bahrain game. With our entrance, the national team scored a goal. We

entered *Azadi* [Freedom] as a group of ordinary women and Iranian citizens.

We got one of our small rights. ... We were a group of Iranian women citizens

without [equal] civil rights who entered this stadium.[32]</EXT>

Critiquing Mehralizadeh's propaganda campaign, she continued: "We also did a little bit of campaign work. When women who were Mehralizadeh's fans cheered for him, we sang *'Ey Iran.'* I had not at all forgotten that I wanted to vote for Moeen." "*Ey Iran*" ("*Marz-e Por Gohar*") is a patriotic song that was composed in 1944 and is at times used as a de facto Iranian national anthem. Because neither the official national anthem during the Pahlavi period nor the postrevolution anthems hold the same nationalistic significance in the cultural realm in Iran or its diaspora, the women activists' deployment of "*Ey Iran*" was a strategy of claiming citizenship and belonging to the nation while distancing themselves from state nationalism.

The presence of women journalists and bloggers in Azadi Stadium was a strategic move to push for equal access to public space during the state's preelection softening of social restrictions. Similarly, the participation of some women without scarves in the street celebrations that followed Iran's victory in the soccer match, and the staging of a demonstration in front of the University of Tehran by a few hundred women to demand equal rights, seized on the opportunity to occupy the political and public space that was created during the election. The women activists took advantage of this stage for strategic performances of citizenship by pushing against the masculinist imaginations of the nation (embodied in national sports) while repeating its conventions through songs and flags.

Of course, women who participated in the stadium protest were not immune from criticism from a wide range of angry bloggers and blog readers. In the comments section of Geesoo Faghfoori's blog, a commentator who identified as "Azadeh" (a woman's name meaning "Free") wrote the following:

<EXT>I was saddened to read that such combatant [*mobaariz*] ladies are

pinning their hopes on a deception called Moeen. How is it that such a lady

has not yet understood that the only opportunity for her liberation and the

liberation of other ladies such as me from the evil of an ideological archaic

regime is to boycott and disappoint its international supporters, so that when

it opens its mouth to say that they [other states] are going to negotiate with

Iran, etc. etc. , we slap it in the mouth! . . . I will not be satisfied with a bone

that the famous Mr. Moeen throws! I deserve complete freedom. . . . I don't

know about you.</EXT>

[…]

Even though some reformists showed their solidarity with Faghfoori and other

women voters by defending them against the opposition groups and regime-change

advocates, many reformists were critical of women's-rights advocates' fight for access to

the stadium and accused them of diluting the reformist cause. For example, in a post titled

"*darbaare-ye Feminism-e Irani*" ("About Iranian Feminism"), Mohammad Heydari, a

reformist blogger with *melli mazhabi* (religious nationalist) views, criticized Parastoo

Dokouhaki, whose post about women's-rights activists' entrance to the stadium garnered a

lot of support from feminist bloggers:

<EXT>I don't know what pleasure these respected ladies get from this

struggle for nothing? . . . I don't understand what entering the stadium has to

do with the problems of this land? Rather than following the issues of the

Iranian woman, Iranian feminism is going after the same elitist talks that are

incidentally rooted in the same things that men say. My lords! [*sarvaraan-e*

man!] For once visit the remote areas of Iran or even Tehran. I know of many

places where girls are not allowed to study. Would it not be better if, instead

of going to the *Azadi* Stadium, you started a movement that asked for

mandatory high school education for girls and boys?[33]</EXT>

Paternalistic tone aside, Heydari's point is valid insofar as the women's-rights movement in

Iran has historically been a middle-class, Tehran-centered movement. By concentrating on

urban middle-class women's issues, urban women's-rights activists have at times ignored

forms of organizing by religious, rural, and working-class women in everyday life

situations, namely the everyday practices that neither enter the realm of social movements

nor are organized under the banner of "feminism." Some women use mosques or *jalasehs*

(women's religious gatherings) for their activism, even though such networks may not be

considered to be a part of the more formal women's-rights movements.[34] Partially because

of the criticism from within and outside of the movement, women's-rights groups tried to

reach out to provinces and rural areas to educate women about discriminatory laws with

regards to family, marriage, divorce, and custody through the One-Million Signatures

campaign.[35] However, most of their priorities still remained limited to the concerns of

middle-class and secular women.[36]

While Heydari pointed to an important shortcoming of the middle-class women's-

rights movement, his criticism was dismissive of the activists' issues. Dokouhaki responded

to Heydari by drawing his attention to a post she had written almost a year before. In her

2004 post, Dokouhaki wrote, "Tomorrow is the Iran-Laos game and Iranian women behind the stadium bars have to watch Laotian women go and sit on platforms that could be their place."[37] When Ali Moazzami, a reformist blogger, criticized Dokouhaki's post (similar to Heydari's objection in 2005), expressing that the Iranian women's movement had failed to prioritize its issues according to the needs of Iranian women, Dokouhaki responded to Moazzami:

<EXT>In the past few years, as soon as we said women's issues, reformist friends would turn and say, first democracy and then other issues. To be honest, their logic was similar to yours, Mr. Moazzami. They said (and they probably still say) that resolving an important issue such as democracy in the country has priority to resolving women's issues. It means that it has priority to everything. As far as I remember, an important part of their logic was that "until there is no freedom and cultural security women's issues would not be resolved." . . . But the view of a segment of women's movement is different. They say that one of the problems that women face is that so far others have decided on their priorities. . . . I think that women's issues (women and not woman, because the issues of a pregnant woman, an employed woman, a rural woman, or a woman student are different) include all sorts of discriminations and conditions that exist for women because of their gender (being a woman). These forms of discrimination are so general that they exist in all countries and nationalities, and sometimes they are limited to a society. . . . Going to the stadium may not be a priority among women's

demands (although I can only talk on my own behalf and say that it is not so

for me), but it [going to the stadium] is to eradicate an existing

discrimination.[39]</EXT>

<P2>Here Dokouhaki explains that women's-rights activists have different priorities and

approaches and that it does not make sense to postpone the demand for one right because

others have not yet been granted. Dokouhaki's response makes it clear that the women's-

rights movement in Iran is neither monolithic nor monological. Finally, her post takes issue

with male nationalists and reformists who accuse women of diverting the reformist

movement. In fact, the dilemma that many Iranian feminist bloggers faced was the

bifurcated approach to feminism and "proper politics" that either excluded women

altogether from political discussions or required that women leave their feminism out of

electoral politics.

While Moazzami and Heydari's responses were written in a seemingly supportive (if

paternalistic) tone, framed as constructive criticism, some explicitly hostile responses by

anonymous commentators were completely dismissive of the legitimacy of the women's-

rights movement. Some saw women's-rights activists' concerns and agendas to be

absolutely irrelevant to the "real" issues of the Iranian people. Others perceived women's-

rights activism to be insufficient and ineffective because it stayed within the framework of

the Islamic state. On the other hand, several bloggers in Iran and in the diaspora applauded

women activists' efforts by leaving them encouraging comments or by thanking them in

their blog posts.[40]

The responses that Dokouhaki and other women's-rights activist bloggers received

about the sit-in at the University of Tehran and the Azadi Stadium events show that women

activists are often caught between male nationalist agendas and the liberating mission of

diasporic opposition groups and states that seek to appropriate the Iranian women

activists' cause against discriminatory laws of the Iranian state. It is at the intersection of

nationalist discourses and the civilizing mission that the Iranian women's-rights activists

assert their agency through negotiating a legitimate space in Iranian politics. As Judith

Butler (1993, 15) argues, "The paradox of subjectivation [*assujetissement*] is precisely that

the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms.

Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does

locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a

relation of external opposition to power."

Women supporters of Moeen refused to be labeled as Mehralizadeh supporters,

even as their presence in the stadium was enabled by the state power (upon the minister of

sports/presidential candidate's permission). While distancing themselves from the state,

women activists tapped into the affective power of nationalism by singing *"Ey Iran,"* a song

about homeland that overrides the power of the state's national anthem. The power of the

song lies in its deployment of the timelessness of love for the motherland, regardless of the

state's (prerevolutionary or postrevolutionary) ideological position. Women gained

entrance into the stadium during the elections through their active participation and

persistence, but their resistance to power was not outside of nationalist discourses that

have both excluded and enabled women as subjects. Nor is Iranian women's-rights activism

outside of liberal discourses of rights. In order to gain their citizenship rights, middle-class

women activists tap into both international and national laws to insert themselves into the

realm of Iranian political citizenship. In other words, while women's-rights activists are

complicit with the Islamic state and the liberal discourses framed within the logic of universal rights of the individual, they have successfully negotiated a space within the realm of Iranian politics and citizenship by overriding these discourses through their strategies and their constant negotiations with the state.

It is important to point out, however, that not all Iranian women activists articulate their resistance to state power through the framework of universal rights. Many religious women have situated their demands within religious frameworks and have effectively challenged discriminatory laws through religious activism.[41] But these forms of participation are barely recognized as "activism" or given due credit in mainstream accounts of Iranian women's activism.

[…]

Even as Islamic feminism has been instrumental in challenging the masculinist laws of the Islamic Republic, some feminist activists and scholars consider Islam and feminism to be incommensurable. As Minoo Moallem (2005b, 177) argues, "Bringing Islam and feminism into the same frame of reference has caused a predictably hysterical reaction from Iranian modernists as well from anti-West fundamentalists." Many Iranian feminist activists resist the dichotomy of "secular" and religious, for such dichotomies do not follow the realities of everyday life and feminism in Iran (Moallem 2005b, 178; Najmabadi 2000, 32). The dismissal of Islamic feminists who challenge the Iranian state wrongly assumes that activism and resistance could be pure, and that the state could be uniform. What the glorified fantasy of pure activism ignores is the fact that state power also enables seemingly "nongovernmental" activism, often producing the conditions of possibility. As is the case outside of Iran, many women's NGOs (secular or religious) in Iran have been supported and

funded in one way or another by either the Iranian state or a foreign state. Despite their claims of being nongovernmental and regardless of whether they receive state funding, NGOs are often part and parcel of governmentality in national or transnational assemblages that include multiple state and non-state actors. As elements of civil society, NGOs that disperse state funding (as was the case with the Dutch state funding for several Iranian organizations) participate in the art of governing populations through bio-political and ethico-political practices that may include normalization of the population according to democratization discourses, Eurocentric secularism, and liberal feminist ethos. Furthermore, resistance to state power is not the only way to gain agency as a citizen subject. As Saba Mahmood (2001, 203) has argued, despite the important insights that a notion "of human agency in feminist scholarship that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power" has enabled, this model of agency "sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal traditions." What is often dismissed as docility and complicity with the "regime" may very well be an expression of agency for many Iranian women activists (feminist or not) who form their politics in relation to the conditions of possibility of activism and scholarship.

[...]

Conclusion: Transnational Cyber-Civil Society and Governmentality

<P1>Rather than celebrating Weblogistan as a new, liberating public sphere and a uniform body of bloggers mobilized against a repressive state, in this chapter I have argued that Weblogistan was an extension of an already existing Iranian civil society. Moreover, as a site of transnational Iranian civil society, Weblogistan was not merely a platform for debate and consensus but also a site where violent conflict and gendered inequalities were repeated. The political discussions in Weblogistan among Iranians in Iran and its diaspora show the existence of a vibrant Iranian civil society that had a transnational character and was a site of conflict and disagreement. Weblogistan, as an element of civil society, was also where gendered citizenship was performed through inclusion and exclusion. In Weblogistan there was no equal footing when it came to discussions about politics and access to policy centers and mainstream media. Even though disagreement was not unusual in passionate offline political discussions, the anonymity of the comments in Weblogistan allowed a measure of violence that was harder to perpetuate in face-to-face debate. As in any civil society, there was no inclusive "we" of Weblogistan. However, celebratory accounts about "freedom through blogging" created an image of an inclusive and equal blogger body mobilized against a uniformly oppressive Iranian state.[74]

The discussions around the 2005 presidential election show the way that the gendered performance of citizenship in Weblogistan used women to define the boundaries of politics through conflict, exclusion, and inequality. As Moallem argues (2005b 61), the logic of modern citizenship, which claims equality of citizens, actually relies on gendered

binaries that subject Iranian women to disciplinary practices. In Weblogistan these embodied disciplinary measures were practiced online, where disembodiment upheld the unfulfilled promise of equal citizenship for the inhabitants of the nation-state. I have also shown that unlike the assumptions of some Iranian opposition groups that perceive the postrevolutionary Iran to be an archaic place where civil society does not exist, Iranian women have been involved dynamically in the cultural and political realms of citizenship. From the beginning of the Iranian Revolution, and especially after the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian women have continued their active participation in civil society by forming organizations that work towards removing discriminatory laws and through less visible entities that work in rural areas and religious establishments to provide social and educational services to women. They have actively participated in arguments and discussions about a range of issues, from family law and women's rights to electoral politics. The Iranian women bloggers' political discussions in Weblogistan and their participation in the street protests (such as the ones I discussed in this chapter) became possible because of a legacy of Iranian women's participation in the political processes and their active role in the Iranian civil society. Iranian women have continued to challenge the discriminatory policies of the state, whether it is through street protests or less conspicuous acts. Social media and online campaigns may have contributed to the wider reach for those who have access to the internet and computers, but they have not been the mainspring for women's participation in civil society. Weblogistan emerged as one element of the transnational civil society where gendered inequalities were reproduced in online conflicts.

Even as the dominant discourse on Weblogistan represented it as a "counter-public" and a subversive bridge to a democratic future, to consider Weblogistan as a site of the transnational Iranian civil society would require us to ask questions about the operations of power that go beyond the realm of state repression. At a time when neoliberal discourses of freedom and democracy—along with militaristic interventions in the name of freedom—produce and reproduce binary categories of free/unfree, democratic/authoritarian, secular/religious, freedom-fighting dissident/terrorist, one is compelled to ask what constitutes dissent in online and offline spaces?[75] What kinds of complicities are inevitable in the formation of new "counter-publics" that rely on naturalized secular ideals of freedom and democracy? If blogs become effective through connection to mainstream media or policy-making centers, which discussions find their way to these centers and audiences, and which remain subjugated? What forms of democracy and citizenship are promoted and celebrated, and what is singled out as an exception or as an anomaly? And last but not least, how are women activists seen as risks to the Iranian state, while becoming hyper-visible subjects in democratization projects? What happens to those who refuse to occupy the subject position of victim in need of rescue? Put simply, how do activist women shuttle between being "at risk" and "posing a risk" to "national security" and the "international community"?

Iranian women's protests continue to bring to surface the tensions that arise from competing forms of governmentality that contend with women as rights-bearing citizens, as threats to national security, as victims to be saved from the Iranian state, and as threats to the "international community." Needless to say, the examples that I discussed in this chapter were not the first or the last time that Iranian women activists mobilized street

protests. On June 12, 2006, a group of Iranian women's-rights activists gathered in Haft-e

Tir Square for a peaceful protests against the misogynistic laws of the Iranian state. Seventy

protesters were arrested, and some received suspended sentences of up to four years.

Except for Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoeini, the sixth *Majlis* MP, all protesters were released on

bail within a week. On March 4, 2007, before the trial of the June 12 arrests, several

women, including those who were arrested on June 12, gathered in front of the courthouse

to show their support for the women who had hearings. Thirty women, some of whom

awaiting trial after the June 12 protest, were arrested and released within a few days on

bail with suspended sentences of two to five years. The news of the arrests circulated

widely on the internet and garnered support from a wide range of human rights

organizations and opposition groups and personalities, including Farah Diba, the former

empress of Iran during the Pahlavi reign. Azadeh Forghani, a Tehran University student

and women's-rights activist who was arrested on both occasions, wrote an open letter to

Diba, criticizing her for co-opting the Iranian women's-rights movement and jeopardizing

the arrested activists' lives. In her letter, Forghani reminds Diba of her silence in response

to the shah's injustices and critiques the dethroned empress for her complicity with the U.S.

neoliberal and militaristic agendas: "Many times when human rights in this land has been

violated in the most intense and bloody way, pretenders such as the empress and the elitist

women's-rights advocates on the other side have acted as if they were snoozing. The deadly

silence among circles of power, the royalty, and sympathizers from the upper echelons, in

response to the killings of the left forces, the socialist-communist, freedom seekers,

dissidents, and others, has been experienced before."[76] At the end, Forghani condemns the

irresponsible and self-serving appropriation of the women's-rights activists' protests by

the royalists and other opportunistic opposition groups:

> <EXT>Mrs. empress! Examine your own conscience or take as witness the
>
> objective conscience of another and tell us what relation—any at all—have
>
> you had or do you have with the women activists of June 12 and March 4?
>
> Their commonality is in their years of struggles for true freedom, eliminating
>
> oppression, liberty, and reaching to the minimum of women's human rights.
>
> . . . But you, empress, under the influence of or in collaboration with those
>
> around you, jump in the middle and opportunistically and ostentatiously
>
> issue statements, as if we are with your camp. And with your actions you
>
> place us, an independent movement that does not rely on any foreign
>
> support or on you, under suspicion and leave us to the hands of the
>
> interrogators and don't give a damn when they say: "here is the proof that
>
> you get money and orders from abroad, your work does not reflect the needs
>
> and desires of women, so there!"[77]</EXT>
>
> <Figure 2.1 here>

<P2>While the arrests of the Iranian women's activists in 2006 and 2007 were widely

publicized in the international media and the human rights organizations' websites,

Forghani's statement did not receive much attention.[78] This was not surprising, as the

dominant representation of Iranian women on the internet is that of powerless victims in

need of rescue. It is as is Forghani's self-representation in a black *chador* and *maqna'eh*

(the strict form of hijab that is often worn by more religious women) rather than a

manteau and *roosary* (a coat and a headscarf that are often wrapped loosely around one's

head), her defense of the communist activists who were executed during the Pahlavi reign,

her simultaneous resistance to the Iranian state and U.S. capitalism and imperialism, and

her refusal to align with the opportunistic opposition groups rendered her unrepresentable

in the mainstream international media. Forghani's letter curbs their enthusiasm of the

liberating forces and opportunistic opposition groups that are keen on appropriating the

arrested Iranian activists.

But this paradox of representability is not limited to the question of visibility. It has

material effects on bodies that are subjected to sanctions, bans, or imprisonment, and are

ultimately excluded from the realm of rights. The immigration laws (including but not

limited to the "Muslim ban") epitomize this paradox or representation. In January 2018,

around the time that Trump signed the "Muslim ban," Iranian women started a solo protest

movement that came to be known as "*Dokhtaraan-e Khiaabaan-e Enqelaab*" ("Girls of the

Revolution Street"). By February, the Iranian state arrested twenty-nine women who stood

on utility boxes, removed their hijabs, and waved them on sticks, protesting the mandatory

hijab law. Even as Donald Trump banned Iranians from entering the United States through

his executive order, he praised the Iranian women's protests in a Twitter message.[79] As

expected, Iran's prosecutor general claimed that the protests were instigated from outside

of the country.[80] Narges Hosseini, the second protestor who was arrested and sent to

prison, made it clear that her act of protest was not related to any outside movement,

including the New York–based online campaign called "My Stealthy Freedom." Led by

Massoumeh (Masih) Alinejad, a former Iranian journalist who now works for Voice of

America, "Stealthy Freedom" deploys the civilizational narratives that fetishize the hijab

and juxtapose it to freedom through unveiling. In her interview with Shahrzad Hemati,

Hosseini said that "I wanted to disassociate my actions from Ms. (Masih) Alinejad's

campaigns. . . . I tied a green ribbon to my wrist with the aim of declaring that I am not

associated with any one [campaign or group], and if there is an association with any

movement, then it is with the Green Movement."[81] Despite her statement, the "Girls of the

Revolution Street" movement was co-opted by the opportunistic opposition groups in

social media, making the women protesters vulnerable to accusations of working for

foreign elements. As Sussan Tahmasebi, an Iranian women's-rights activist—who was

arrested in Iran multiple times, was one of the organizers of the June 12, 2006 protest, and

now lives in the United States—put it eloquently in a Facebook post, "Struggles for

emancipation need to reflect the realities of those on the ground, rather than those of

international audiences or media or super hopeful diaspora-based political groups who

plan to ride into Iran under the banner of Netanyahu or Trump!" Repulsed by the "wishful

cyber space diaspora" who had accused Shahrzad Hemati of having fabricated her

interview with Narges Hosseini, forcing her to release her tapes to prove the authenticity of

Hosseini's statement, Tahmasebi wrote the following:

<EXT>It is especially problematic when the fight for women's liberation

becomes part and parcel of neocon supported movements for regime change

by people who want to go to Iran with tanks and guns, by those who basically

don't give a damn about women, only use women's status to attack their

political opponents (often choosing to employ seriously sexist language) and

equate the end to compulsory hejab with the end to the Islamic Republic—in

other words making it a highly securitized effort. . . . Most unsettling for me

however is how some of these groups, their most outspoken in fact, tend to

be racist and Islamophobic.[82]</EXT>

It is, indeed, unsettling to make sense of the simultaneous lionization and

demonization of Iranian women—a paradox that Paul Amar's notion of "parahuman"

(2013) can help explain. In discussing what he calls the emergence of the "human security

state" in the "global south," Amar argues the following:

<EXT>In the universe of human security, sexuality is implicated in modes of

governance that blend parahumanization (the creation of politically disabled

'victim' subjects that must, essentially, be constantly protected or rescued by

enforcement interventions regardless of consent or will to be rescued),

hypervisibilization (the spotlighting of certain identities and bodies as

sources of radical insecurity and moral panic in ways that actually render

invisible the real nature of power and social control), and securitization (the

reconfiguration of political debates and claims around social justice, political

participation, or resource distribution into technical assessment of danger,

operations of enforcement, and targetings of risk populations). (17)</EXT>

<P2>Amar defines para-humanization as a "notion of humanized security where rights-

bearing subjects of the state become suspects under the control of privatized rescue

industries" (18). Following Amar, I argue that the Iranian woman protester embodies the

para-human figure who needs to be rescued (as a woman) and who poses a security risk

(as a foreign agent in the context of the nation-state and as an Iranian/Muslim in the

transnational context). Put simply, produced as a hyper-visible victim and villain, the

Iranian women protester is simultaneously at risk and risky. She is at risk of prostitution,

foreign influence, or harassment in public, and thus needs protection by the security state.

At the same time, she is a risky subject because she poses a threat to national security. The

woman protester who is rendered at risk or risky by the Iranian state becomes hyper-

visible, thanks to the enthusiastic circulation of her image on social media by human rights

regimes, liberationist states, opposition groups outside of Iran, and the Iranian state's

television "confessions," where protesters admit to being duped by outside forces. The

hyper-visibilization of the Iranian woman protester legitimizes securitization by the

Iranian state, not in the name of human rights but in the name of national security and the

protection of Islam and the *Umat* (Islamic community) from the danger of the foreign

enemy. While Amar's analysis focuses on the security state, I suggest that the figure of the

Iranian woman protester as para-human is not limited to her relationship to the Iranian

state but concerns the security of the "international community." That is, the Iranian

woman (protester) as para-human shuttles between the national and the transnational,

wherein the "international civil society" hyper-visibilizes her as a "victim" who needs to be

rescued by the liberating forces (Abu-Lughod 2013). The hyper-visibilization of this figure

as both brave and vulnerable legitimizes the securitization measures of the "liberating

states," including exclusionary immigration laws, economic sanctions, and ultimately war

in the name of the protection of the "international community." Perhaps because not all

Iranian women protesters can be mobilized in the civilizational narratives of rescue

(Forghani and Hosseini's refusal being examples) and because the image of the menacing

woman protester—epitomized in the angry veiled woman shouting anti-American slogans

during the hostage crisis of 1979—continues to haunt this rescue narrative, the figure of

the Iranian woman activist/protester shuttles between rightfulness (through the

universalist logic of "women's rights are human rights") and rightlessness (through the

racist logic of protecting the "international civil society" against the threat posed by Muslim

terrorists).[83] Even as the Iranian woman protester who is perceived to be vulnerable and in

need of protection becomes hyper-visible in liberationist narratives (the most famous

example being Neda Agha Soltan's image during the 2009 street protests) and even as a

select number of Iranian dissidents (including a select number of women's-rights activists)

are hired by the U.S. propaganda apparatus and given special visas, the Iranian woman

remains a risky subject. But because risk inevitably concerns the population and not just

the individual, the Iranian population at large is subjected to exclusionary immigration

policies, "crippling" economic sanctions, and ultimately the politics of rightful killing. Yet

the virality of risk means that its management (and not complete elimination) can also be

achieved virally through democratization in the realm of cyber civil society, which

functions as a correlate of the technology of government (Foucault, cited in Gordon 1991,

23), a topic to which I will turn in the next chapter.

---

[1] In postrevolutionary Iran a large and diverse body of organizations that were involved in the Iranian polity created a complex and multicentered scene of exercising power. Despite the will of conservative factions, and against the erroneous assumptions by many opposition groups in exile, this fragmentation has prevented the government from containing the polyphony of politics, especially after the end of the war and the death of the unassailable leader, Khomeini. By 1981, when most political parties (including the Socialist and Communist Parties) that posed a threat to the *vilaayat-e faqeeh* (the rule of the

faqeeh/source of emulation) had been suppressed, Khomeini's followers were divided into factions according to their views on political Islam and their interpretation of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Those who believed in *fiqh-e sonnati* (traditional *fiqh*) claimed that the Islamic state should follow the pure Mohammadan Islam (*Islam-e naab-e Mohammadi*). They believed that primary ordinances based on the Qur'an and the Sunna were sufficient for governance and that secondary ordinances should be issued only in extraordinary circumstances. Others, who believed in a dynamic *fiqh* (*fiqh-e pouya*), argued that Sharia should produce new and changing decrees according to the needs of the time (Moslem 2002, 47–49).

[2] For a history of political parties before the revolution, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (1982). For a summary of factional politics in post-revolutionary Iran, see Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (2002).

[3] See "Stay Out of It, Obama," *Daily Beast*, June 19, 2009, accessed July 31, 2017, http://www.thedailybeast.com/stay-out-of-it-obama. In a 2009 interview, Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, claimed that the United States supported Iranian protesters behind the scenes. See the transcript of her interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria, August 9, 2009, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0908/09/fzgps.01.html.

[4] Boroumand is the cofounder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran.

[30] See "Congratulations on Women's Entrance to the Stadium and the Victory of the National Team!" in *Zan Nevesht* (*Woman's Writing*), June 9, 2005, http://www.parastood.com/archives/002032.php.

[31] See "From Ganji to Azadi," *Iran-baan*, June 9, 2005, http://fereshteh.blogfa.com/post-20. aspx. Ghazi was imprisoned in 2004 for her women's-rights activism and articles in the *Etemad* newspaper. She has since immigrated to the United States.

[32] See "The Freedom Game with Women's Presence" ("Baaziyeh Azadi ba hozoor-e-e zanan"), *Hanouz*, June 10, 2005, http://www.hanouz.com/archives/001719.html.

[33] Mohammad Heydari, "About Iranian Feminism," in *Zemestan: parakandeh neveshteh-haaye Mohammad Heydari* (*Winter: Scattered Writings of Mohammad Heydari*), June 9, 2005, http://heydary.blogspot.com/2005/06/blog-post_09.html.

[34] *Jalaseh* literally translates into "meeting." Women's jalaseh is an informal gathering, often organized by a network of neighborhood women, where women recite the Qur'an, sometimes have food and tea, and listen to *mo'ezeh* (preaching) by either a clergyman or a woman *mo'ezegar* (preacher)/"*khanoom*-e *jalaseh*." The woman who hosts the jalaseh may do so as a personal *nazr* (religious due paid in monetary or nonmonetary

fashion after making a wish to her God and promising to perform a pious act such as prayers, a charity act such as distributing food or money among the needy, or organizing a jalaseh).

[35] The One-Million Signatures Campaign, which started in 2006, is a door-to-door and internet campaign that asks for changes in the Iranian constitution to eliminate discrimination against women. See http://we-change.org/english.

[36] The lack of attention to economic concerns of rural and working-class women (and men) among many reformist intellectuals and activists may be one of the reasons for the victory of the populist candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who focused his campaign on economic disparity and the plight of the poor. As I will discuss below, after the first round of the elections, Khorshid Khanoom noted in a defeated and self-critical tone that Karrubi's promise to give people 600,000 rials each month gained him some votes.

[37] See *Zan Nevest,* November 16, 2004, http://www.parastood.com/archives/001093.php.

[39] See *Zan Nevesht,* November 25, 2004, http://notes.parastood.ir/archives/001119.php#more.

[40] After women bloggers entered the stadium, many women bloggers posted "*bacheh-ha motshakereem*!" ("Thank you, gang!"), a slogan that fans of a sports team often shout after the game.

[41] Some of these activists are Faezeh Hashemi (Rafsanjani's daughter) and Zahra Rahnavard (the scholar, politician, artist, and wife of the 2009 reformist candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi).

[74] Kamvari pointed out to me that none of the articles about Weblogistan mentioned her widely read blog, even though she generated controversial discussions. She attributed this elision to the fact that her posts were mainly about nonnormative sexuality and politics that were either labeled as radical (when it came to sexuality) or complicit with the "regime" when it came to discussing politics in Iran or critiquing the segments of the Iranian diaspora who work in U.S. think tanks (phone conversation, July 15, 2007).

[75] Such binary narratives ignore the democratic political processes in the postrevolutionary Iranian state, conflate democracy with secularism, assume the incommensurability of Islam and democracy, and legitimize imperialistic agendas under the cloak of democratization.

[76] See "Open Letter to Farah Diba," *Peyvand News*, March 17, 2007, accessed July 1, 2018, http://www.payvand.com/news/07/mar/1231.html.

[77] See "Open Letter to Farah Diba."

[78] The lack of attention to Forghani's important statement was the reason that Niki Akhavan and I translated the open letter into English and circulated it online.

[79] See Trump, Donald J. 2017. "Many Reports of Peaceful Protests by Iranian Citizens Fed up with Regime's Corruption & Its Squandering of the Nation's Wealth to Fund Terrorism Abroad. Iranian Govt Should Respect Their People's Rights, Including Right to Express Themselves. The World Is Watching! #IranProtests." Tweet. *@realdonaldtrump*, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/946949708915924994? lang=en, accessed July 10, 2018.

[80] Kamali Dehghan, Saeed. 2018. "Tehran Hijab Protest: Iranian Police Arrest 29 Women." *The Guardian*, February 2, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/02/tehran-hijab-protest-iranian-police-arrest-29-women, accessed July 10, 2018.

[81] See Hosseini's interview with Shahrzad Hemati at https://iranianwomen.info/2018/02/15/i-acted-independently, accessed July 4, 2018.

[82] Sussan Tahmasebi's Facebook post, dated February 16, 2018. Quoted with author's permission.

[83] Ben Affleck's 2012 film, *Argo,* is an example of the representations of Iranian women protesters.