

## **Radical Islamism in the context of Arab Spring: shaping Rouhani's Policies towards women in Iran**

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### **Introduction**

Hasan Rouhani won the election of 7<sup>th</sup> President of Islamic Republic of Iran in June 2013 on two significant promises: a nuclear deal with USA and relaxing of Islamic orthodoxy on women in Iran. Both issues are linked to each other in order to normalize relations with the West, particularly United States of America and attract the western investment that in turn would gradually lead to end of the isolation of Iran, an end to sanctions, spiraling inflation and scarcity and development of an improved economy. While significant progress has been made in the direction of nuclear deal as evident from several rounds of negotiation between Iran and P5+ 1 leading to Agreement on Framework, however not much significant steps have been undertaken to liberalize the issues related to civil and political liberty, human rights and women rights in particular. On the contrary conditions and rights related to these fields have further deteriorated. This paper concerns and intends to explain the reasons that obstruct the Rouhani government to unleash the reformist measures, notwithstanding having the intentions and desires to do so.

The paper is divided among three parts. The first part provides a brief background of women rights since the foundation of Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) upto Mahmoud Ahmadinejad period. The second deals with Rouhani's election promises related to women. The third part deals with the internal and external reasons including the Iran's perception of Arab Spring and emergence of radical Islamism in West Asia that has an implication for shaping the Islamic orthodoxy of the Rouhani government towards women in Iran.

### **Women's rights under Islamic Republic of Iran**

With the establishment of Islamic republic of Iran in 1979 women has been reduced to the 'object' of national politics. She has been made 'the identity marker' of Iranian nation- state.<sup>1</sup>

Like many other states, IRI has also intervened in women's life for the purpose of internal and external policy. Internationally, the state uses women and their portrayal as westernized and Islamized, veiled or unveiled in order to depict a distinct political identity and message abroad.

The 1979 Revolution was a turning point for Iranian women. It saw the massive participation of women from all walks of life-secular, religious, urban, rural, rich, poor, young, old- all participated and supported the revolution supported the revolution but defined their participation and demand as freedom, independence and social equality. The Khomeini's government did reverse many of the progressive policies of Shah on the ground of it being anti- Islamic. Veil was made compulsory and women's right to divorce and child custody were scrapped. The minimum age of marriage for girls was lowered to nine years and women had to obtain paternal consent for marriage (Article 1044 of Civil Code ).<sup>ii</sup> Polygamy and temporary marriage were encouraged. Population control and family planning were condemned as an imperialist conspiracy to violate the rights of the Islamic nation and impair its growth and prosperity.

In 1982, parliament approved the Islamic Law of Retribution, introducing flogging, stoning and payment of blood money for crimes ranging from adultery to violation of Islamic dress codes. The discipline of education for women was restricted to teaching, nursing and midwifery seen as more in-line with their domestic and motherhood responsibilities. Married women were also prevented from studying abroad without the presence of their husband. Women's entry to a whole range of technical, engineering and experimental sciences was prohibited thereby drastically reducing her employment opportunities. Gender stereotyping was evident in all school textbooks where the role of women, motherhood and *hejab* was enforced.

Further, Islamic vision of Khomeini did not hamper the access of girls to education; rather the regime facilitated and resulted in the unprecedented educational development of women compared to Pahlavi Shah's period and contrary to western public perception. Indeed, women's education was considered as an important strategy for the Islamisation of society. The women, as the link between family and nation, had to participate in both the processes: as a mother for the child and as a teacher for the pupil. Furthermore, women's presence in educational institutions was a political urgency. The Islamic state had to fill the schools and universities with its female supporters to counteract the influence of the secular middle classes.

As compared to Shah's period, there was tremendous improvement in the enrollment of women in school, college and university education. In general, with regard to female literacy and schooling the census of 1986 indicated that the rate of literacy amongst the urban women had risen from 55.1% in 1976 to 65.2 per cent in 1986.<sup>iii</sup> Literacy amongst rural women was standing at 36% as compared to 16.5 per cent in 1976.<sup>iv</sup> This was due to the fact that the Islamic Republic reintroduced segregation and veiling and increased the religious content of the curriculum, emphasizing traditional culture. Thus, while cultivating their own vision of society and ideology, the regime made educational institutions more acceptable to the traditional classes.

During the revolution's first decade, official statistics showed a decline in women's economic activity from 12.9 per cent in 1976 to 8.1 per cent in 1986.<sup>v</sup> However due to a decade long Iran-Iraq War women were drawn into the work force as nurses, doctors and support for soldiers on the war front. In the absence of men, many women became the family bread winners. Though constitution granted the right to vote and get elected but women's application for contesting election were summarily rejected by the powerful body of Guardian Council which is entrusted with the task of screening the 'Islamic' profile of the candidates. As a result a very few women were elected to the Parliament or nominated in the government bodies during the Khomeini period. Thus, during the Khomeini period women's rights issue was looked upon primarily from ideological point of view whereas during Rafsanjani and Khatami period the issue was framed/looked in a less ideological way and more guided by pragmatic considerations.

However during the Rafsanjani period [1989-1997] many barriers to women's educational achievement and their employment were removed. Women were encouraged to enter certain scientific and technical fields such as gynecology, pharmacology and the laboratory work etc. For example, in medicinal disciplines the number increased to 60 per cent.<sup>vi</sup> In 1992, 42 percent of Iran's university graduates and roughly one-third of those with doctorates were women.<sup>vii</sup> The government policies along with support of a section of *ulema* led to a steady increase in women's economic activity, both in formal and informal sector. However most of the women in Iran were employed in the state sector. Thus contrary to 1986, the proportion of active women to the total female population had dropped sharply from 10.8% in 1976-77 to 6.1%; it increased to 8.7% in 1991.<sup>viii</sup> In 1992, a law allowed women to sit as assistant judges in courts hearing divorce cases,

which led to the appointment of 200 women judicial counselors in 1996 in order to ensure more satisfactorily women's rights in courts.

Rafsanjani also reversed the Islamic Republic's policy of encouraging large families and launched a family planning program to curb Iran's alarmingly rapid rate of population growth. The success of this program is one of the Islamic Republic's most striking achievements. From 3.4 per cent annual growth rate in 1986, it came down to 2.7 percent in 1992 to 1.8 per cent in 1995.<sup>ix</sup>

President Khatami [1997-2004] continued and intensified the liberalized policy of Rafsanjani vis a vis women. Under Khatami, special priority was given to policies that empowered and expanded women's opportunities. As a consequence the participation of women in the higher education increased tremendously. In 1999, the percentage of females attending university surpassed the number of men for the first time since the revolution. The admission rate for females was about four per cent higher than for male students.<sup>x</sup> In 2000, half of all Iranian university students were women, as were 60% of entering students, who were selected on the basis of a difficult nationwide exam.<sup>xi</sup> The sixth Parliament, in 2000 reformed the education law allowing unmarried female students to study abroad.

During Khatami's era women were appointed to high positions like Masoumeh Ebtekar was appointed as the Vice President of Environment, Zahra Shojai as his Special Advisor on women's affairs in the government, Zahra Rahnavard was appointed as the chancellor of the women's Al Zahra University, Jamileh Kadivar, was appointed as his special advisor on press affairs. The most tangible measure undertaken by the Ministry of Education to reduce gender bias in schools was the revision of certain textbook pictures during 2002–03 in order to portray more girls engaged in traditionally 'male-orientated' tasks, especially in the technical-vocational fields.<sup>xii</sup> According to a study published by the University of North Carolina Population Studies and Research Center for Asia and the Pacific, the percentage of all Iranian women who are economically active has more than doubled from 6.1% in 1986 to 13.7% in 2000.<sup>xiii</sup>

In 2002, parliament raised the age of marriage for girls from nine to 13. Khatami's presidency also saw the burgeoning of women led non-government organizations and publications of many

women's magazines that laid the foundation for a more vibrant civil society. The office for Women's Affairs in the Ministry of Agriculture also implemented many projects for rural women.<sup>xiv</sup> In 2004, 13 women were elected to parliament—the largest number since the revolution.<sup>xv</sup> The modified parts of the suspended Family Protection Law were reintroduced and several women became judges along with special advisors to presiding clerics on special family courts.

Unlike Rafsanjani and Khatami government's reformist approach, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad government adopted a hard line, conservative approach towards women. As a result many of the gains that women had achieved in the field of education, marriage, health, employment opportunities and political participation under the previous two regimes either received serious jolt. Resurrecting the initial pro-natalist views of Ayatollah Khomeini, he encouraged women to return to their natural role as nurturers. New governmental programmes and publications stressed traditional interpretations of female issues, emphasizing the role of women as mothers and downplaying female participation in the workplace and even in politics. Thus the government textbooks showed that a good woman is a good mother and wife, not a good manager, an employer, a director, a trader, a politician and so on<sup>xvi</sup> which has a huge impact on women's employment. In 2008, female labour participation in state enterprises was 34 per cent as compared to 66 percent male.<sup>xvii</sup> Ahmadinejad government extolled a greater resort to polygamy as a solution to pervasive female unemployment.

In April 2008, the government announced its intention to limit acceptance of female students in specific fields of university study. As a result, number of public universities banned women from studying in 77 fields of study, following the orders by the Ministry of Education (Elementary and secondary Education) and the Ministry of Science and Technology that included technical and applied science majors, political science, computer science, business and engineering etc.<sup>xviii</sup> The government announced 60 percent of university seats to male students and forty percent to female students, even if their grades are higher than male students.<sup>xix</sup> Further, since September 2009, female students were required to study at the universities in their towns or cities, thereby restricting their free access to higher education till the end of his presidency.

The budget for governmental institutions affecting women was significantly reduced.<sup>xx</sup> The government closed down *Zanan*, the country's leading feminist magazine. In 2007 elections, only 43 women were elected to local councils out of tens of thousands of seats.<sup>xxi</sup> The percentage of female MP's decreased from 4.4% in the sixth parliament (2000-2004) to 2.7% to eighth parliament (2008-12).<sup>xxii</sup>

The government launched a number of campaigns like "culture of modesty" (*farhang-e effaf*) in 2005, Social Morality Plan (*Tarhe Amniyat Ejtema'i*) in March 2007 which were primarily aimed at restoring the strict veiling (*hejab*) of women as practiced in the early years of the Islamic Republic and at eliminating what is called 'bad *hejab*', the women who adorned *hejab* differently than the state's prescription of wearing *hejab*. Through increased police vigilance, police have identified and detained women who fail to comply with the Islamic dress code. Repeat offenders were referred to the judicial system where sentences included fines and even lashings.<sup>xxiii</sup> The number of cases related to trials and harassment of women including allegations of rape and torture of detainees went up. The government harshly dealt with 'The One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality'- launched in 2006 to secure one million signatures on petitions demanding equal rights for women in all spheres- arresting several women, put on trial and sentenced to prison terms.

The period from 1979 clearly shows that IRI did not have fixed Islamic policy as far as women are considered. It varies from one regime to another despite the fact that there is a consensus that women are an important marker of national identity which enjoins that the Iranian polity must regulate her life. From Imam Khomeini to Ahmadinejad –all testifies that there is no 'monolithic, fixed Islamic gender ideology' that determines and legitimizes the gender policies of Islamic Republic of Iran. All post-Khomeini regimes used Islamic narratives to legitimize the state policies intended to either liberalize or de-liberalize the Islamic values that impinges on the lives of Iranian women. Thus even though all regimes--right from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad-- are Islamic; their Islamic understanding of the nation varies that itself has an implication in terms of hardening or relaxing the Islamic codes while claiming the authenticity of Islamic identity of

nation-state. Every regime has constructed policies keeping in mind various national and international factors. This trend is also reflected in Rouhani period.

### **President Rouhani and Election Promises related to Women**

Though the concerns of women voters of course largely reflected those of Iranian society in general and blend with positive atmosphere for change, Rouhani did however make some specific campaign promises with respect to women's rights. While they certainly did not meet the longstanding demands of women's rights activists, his promises did signal a clear departure from the regressive policies of the Ahmadinejad period. Rouhani had pledged during his election campaign that the discrimination between men and women would be eliminated in all social arenas in his administration. During his presidential campaign, Rouhani's remarks in support of women's rights were unequivocal: "*Men and women are equal in the eyes of Islam and the Islamic Revolution,*" Rouhani said in a speech during his campaign at the Great Islamic Encyclopedia Center on May 1, 2013. "*The next government will be the government of equal opportunity for men and women.*" He added, "*Ignoring women's demands is in conflict with the logic of the Islamic Revolution.*" On June 9, 2013, in the Grand Mosque in Sari, "*In [my] government...no one will (be allowed to) violate women's rights in the name of Islam, because I will not be hiding behind the veil of religion and piety.*"<sup>xxiv</sup> Throughout his campaign, Rouhani signaled his willingness to establish a women's affairs ministry, as well as to end the gender segregation enforced in universities by the previous administration, to revisit the approach to regulating Iranian women's dress in the public sphere, to work towards the equality of employment opportunities, and to address legal discrimination against women. Indeed, his campaign advisor on women's affairs specifically mentioned re-examining laws relating to personal status, as well as Iran's approach to the CEDAW.<sup>xxv</sup> The victory of Rouhani provided hope, optimism and energy to the Iranian's women because of his promises of gender equality and moderation.

### **Developments towards Women's Rights under President Rouhani**

While Iranian women living in the country<sup>xxvi</sup> feel that the space for civil society has been slow to open up, meetings of women's groups are now beginning to take place more freely. Different

groups are looking to register as formal organizations, marking some progress, and the former editor of Zanan, a women's monthly shut down under Ahmadinejad in 2008, has obtained a new permit to publish a monthly magazine on women.<sup>xxvii</sup>

However nothing substantial has happened since Rouhani assumed his Presidency. It took Rouhani until October 2013 to finally appoint Shahindokht Mowlaverdi as Vice President of the Center for Women and Family Affairs, affiliated with the office of the President. While women activists were happy to have three female VPs (out of 12),<sup>xxviii</sup> two of them reformists with strong experience of working effectively with civil society and women's groups, they recognize that the position of VP carries less weight than that of a Minister. Rouhani's failure to nominate a female minister was indeed disappointing to women activists who had pressed for the appointment. Yet, those hopeful that Rouhani's leadership would bring about some change took comfort in the fact that Mowlaverdi, a reformist with a long record of working on women's issues, was the one chosen as the VP on women's affairs and that VPs do serve as members of the Rouhani Cabinet.

Mowlaverdi has appointed a religious scholar<sup>xxix</sup> to work on the question of how to incorporate more progressive interpretations of Sharia into Iranian law. She has also has promised to re-examine, and attempt to revoke, discriminatory legislation introduced during Ahmadinejad's two presidential terms, but it is unclear whether she will have the support within the Rouhani administration, the parliament and the Guardian Council to make substantial changes in laws on women's rights, despite the fact that the need to reform discriminatory laws is being echoed by women from all walks of life, ranging from independent women's movement activists to conservative women associated with the state.

Yet by and large the pledges Rouhani made during his campaign regarding women's rights have not been fulfilled, and discriminatory gender-based policies have continued to advance, if not accelerate. And, for the first time in five years, a permit was issued in Tehran in 2014 allowing people to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8. Rouhani has at least publicly made some statements on women's rights and has said he wanted a politically more open Iran. Rouhani said, "we will not accept the culture of sexual discrimination. ... Is that possible to corner and marginalize the role of half of the society? Women must enjoy equal opportunity, equal protection and equal social rights. ... According to the Islamic rules, man is not the stronger sex and woman is not the weaker one."<sup>xxx</sup> Rouhani said on 12 April, 2015 "The

government considers it its duty to take necessary action for women to enjoy and utilize social opportunities.” “The government will strive so that 50% of the society does not remain unemployed, isolated, and [Iran’s] second gender,” he added.<sup>xxx1</sup>

Notwithstanding this conciliatory gesture towards women, it appears that there are some major threats to women’s rights on which Rouhani’s administration has little control. Some of them are as follows:

### **Retrogressive Legislation under Rouhani Administration: Its Implications for Women Rights**

#### **(A) The Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice:**

In 2014, a series of acid attacks on women in public places occurred in the Iranian city of Isfahan. The attacks involved unidentified men flinging acid into the faces of young women, who were usually sitting in cars. In a number of the attacks, eyewitnesses reported the assailants proclaimed they were confronting improper *hejab* as they flung the acid. These attacks have not taken place in a vacuum. Nor are they a series of isolated incidents. These incidents have occurred in the midst of state legislation called Plan to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice. In June 2014, Iranian MPs took up for consideration this plan. It calls for all citizens to take it upon themselves to promote “virtue” and prevent “vice” by “heart, verbal, written, and practical action. It “invites” and in fact “forces” the citizenry to promote “virtuous acts” and prevent “forbidden” ones. The one behavior the plan singles out as an example of the “virtue” that must be promoted is female adherence to correct hejab.

While Article 5 of Plan forbids the violation of the “life, property, residence, workplace or private space of others unless a judicial authority allows it,” an Amendment to this article states, “Areas that are in plain view of the public, such as some parts of apartments, hotels, hospitals, and vehicles, are not considered private.” No less than four of the Plan’s articles—Articles 6, 7, 8, and 10—explicitly call for the judicial protection of enforcers of the Plan. Yet there is no similar provision for the protection of the targets of such enforcement.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The Plan further states: “The *Basij* Organization is required to employ all *Basiji* members within the framework of the communicated policies of the Supreme Council to establish the culture and

to implement Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in the verbal stage.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Although the Plan has not yet reached full and final approval, it continues to advance through the legislative process. On 3 February 2015, the Plan was moved to the full floor of Parliament and the MPs began voting on the various articles of the bill; several of them have been approved.

In October 2014, Abdolhamid Mohtasham, head of Ansar-e Hezbollah, announced the launch of a street campaign to confront women who don't observe “proper” Islamic *hejab*.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The acid attacks against the young women in Isfahan are the results of such policies. It may be noted that in June 2014, conservative MPs summoned the Iranian Minister of Interior Affairs, Abdol Rahman Fazli for parliamentary hearings to question why the ministry did not take “appropriate actions” to confront women who wear leggings. While the photos of women in leggings were screened in Parliament on large monitors, Iranian MPs asked the minister to confront these “aberrations” more strictly.

This legislation not only violates the rights of all Iranian women, it also presents a danger to their continued safety. In a rare direct reference to this Plan, Rouhani stated on April 12, 2015 that, “We have no patriarchy nor matriarchy in Islam, what we have is a meritocracy. Men and women side by side by each other on social issues, are [the embodiment] of [the Islamic principle of] ‘promotion of virtue and prevention of vice.’ Although, unfortunately, in our society today, ‘prevention of vice’ has only been brought out on some streets, and against women at that.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

#### **(B) The Bill for Comprehensive Population and Sanctity of the Family Plan**

The proposed legislation provides incentives for families to have more children, by providing them with cash incentives and other types of benefits such as early retirement, increased maternity leave, etc

Article 4 of this plan emphasizes that a woman's primary role is to be a mother and any social or work-related activities undertaken by women should aim to strengthen this role. Article 24 of this plan proposes nine months of maternity leave for women, while new fathers will be allowed to take only 10 days off and only for the purpose of supporting the mother. It gives the

impression that caring for children is solely the woman's responsibility. The proposal also gives priority preference for hiring male employees. Article Nine of the bill states, "In both public and private sectors the priority in hiring should be given to: males with children, married males without children, and females with children respectively. Single individuals may be hired if there are no qualified married applicants."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The bill is under expert review and soon we will hand over its findings to the *Majles* (Parliament). However, the bill has been passed by the Cultural Committee of Parliament and has been put in the agenda for a full Parliamentary vote. As of this writing it is unclear how the bill will fare. Parliament's research arm, the Islamic Parliament Research Center, has criticized the bill, and the Rouhani administration is currently arguing that it does not have the funds needed to implement the Plan.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The proposed legislation has also been criticized for favouring male-headed households when, according to official figures, there are some 2.5 million female-headed households in Iran, and in 82% of those homes, the head of the household is unemployed.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### **(C) Bill for Preservation of Chastity and *Hejab* Plan**

Another major anti-women legislation currently under review in Parliament, is the Preservation of Chastity and *Hejab* Plan. Introduced in October 2014, this bill is largely concerned with enforcing conservative Islamic dress for women in public, but also includes employment limitations for women. As reported in the *Etemad* newspaper, if Parliament passes the plan, women police officers will warn "women who offend the public chastity with their inappropriate and un-Islamic *hejab*. These women will have to take educational classes (in public chastity) and pay between 200,000 to one million *tomans* (about \$60 to \$300) in fines."<sup>xxxix</sup> If enacted, the legislation is certain to encourage further harassment and attacks against women.

The law also requires that men and women to be separated in the workplace. According to the *Shargh* newspaper, "Article Two refers to a section of administrative regulations, in which the improper *hejab* of government employees is addressed, and adds that those who violate this regulation will receive a written warning in their employment record. If their violation is repeated they will lose up to one third of their salary, overtime, and other pay for a period of one to twelve months."<sup>xl</sup>

The plan also includes gender segregation initiatives and limitations on women's work hours. As reported in Etemad, the plan requires that "Women employed in retail should not mix with men. These women should work during conventional hours, meaning 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. If a retailer violates this provision it will be shut down for a week. If the violation is repeated, the business will be closed for one month."<sup>xi</sup> This bill is still under review in the Judicial Committee of the Parliament; it has not yet been approved or sent to the floor for a vote.

#### **D) Reducing Women's Work Hours Bill**

In June 2013, the outgoing Ahmadinejad administration introduced the Reducing Women's Work Hours Bill. This bill mandates a reduction in hours women are allowed to work. Its proponents claim this is meant to increase the time women spend at home and with their children. The bill states that, "women who have children younger than seven or spouses with health issues can [either] take one full day off or work a little less every day." Shahindokht Mowlaverdi, Rouhani's vice president for Women and Family Affairs stated that "Passing bills such as Reducing Women's Work Hours harms women's employment opportunities in the short- and long-term." The bill was debated in Parliament after Rouhani took office in August 2013, and was passed by the Social Affairs Committee of Parliament in late 2014. As of this writing it has not yet been sent to the floor of Parliament for a vote.

#### **E) The Plan To Increase Birth Rate And Prevent Population Decline**

In April 2014, Parliament took up the Plan to Increase Birth Rate and Prevent Population Decline. The Shargh newspaper reported that this bill banned abortion, vasectomy, and tubectomy, and punished the prevention of pregnancy by two to five years in prison. This bill if passed can have adverse effect on women's health. Introduced in April 2014, the bill was sent to the Public Health Committee of Parliament, where it was passed in June 2014. It was then introduced on the floor of Parliament in July where it was approved and passed on for the required approval by the Guardian Council. The Council wanted certain articles changed, and sent the bill back to the Public Health Committee to address those issues. In August 2014, it was announced that the existing Plan had been shelved for undisclosed reasons, and that the Committee was working on more comprehensive legislation regarding this issue.

### Growing attacks against women in Iran

According to official statistics during 2013-2014, 2,917,000 women have been warned for their *hejab* by morality police, from which 205,052 were forced to sign a written statement promising not to violate the *hejab* law in the future, and 18,082 were referred to the Judiciary to be tried in courts.<sup>xliii</sup> Moreover, there were numerous additional *hejab* “interventions” by other non-governmental organizations, such as the *Basij* militia and its affiliated groups, but there are no reliable statistics regarding their number.<sup>xliii</sup> On 24 October, 2014 Iran executed twenty six year old , Rayhaneh Jabbari. She was executed for killing a man who tried to sexually assault her.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has sharply criticized Rouhani for failing to improve human rights since taking office. Ban pointed out, “He (Rouhani) has not made any significant improvement” in ending human rights abuses since taking office. That Iran was doing too little to improve its human rights record. There have been more executions, higher detentions of regime opponents and greater discrimination against women. Numerous women's rights defenders are being threatened, sentenced or imprisoned in Iran. Human rights defenders and women's rights activists continue to face arrest and persecution.”<sup>xliv</sup> The report of the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights in Iran further stated: “Women are subject to discrimination, entrenched both in law and in practice.”<sup>xlv</sup>

On March 11, 2014 Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on the human rights conditions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, released his second annual report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), pointing out that there exists an “apparent increase in the degree of seriousness of human rights violations” and he expressed his concern at the “rate of executions in the country, especially for crimes that do not meet serious crimes standards.”<sup>xlvi</sup> According to Ahmed Shaheed, at least 176 people had been put to death in January, February, and early March of 2014. Several were executed in public. At least 500 people were executed in 2013, with 57 publicly. Reportedly, those who were executed included 27 women and two children. These numbers are officially documented figures, but according to other sources, the figure for executions might be much higher. According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, more than 500 people have been executed since Rouhani has taken office. One report has noted that over 1200 executions in the past 15 months of Rouhani’s presidency has taken place<sup>xlvii</sup>.

Moreover there is a growing incident of throwing acids on the face of non-veil women of Iran. This has led to large number of protest organized by men and women in Tehran and Isfahan. Demonstrators in Isfahan and Tehran carried placards with messages that included “Stop violence against women,” “Cancel anti-women laws,” and “A safe street is my right.” Those demonstrations were harshly suppressed. Hundreds were jailed; there were credible reports of brutal mistreatment and deaths of some prisoners; and mass show trials followed. This time, police chiefs quickly promised to find and arrest the perpetrators of the acid attacks, and President Hasan Rouhani appointed three cabinet ministers to get to the bottom of Isfahan incidents.

### **In lieu of Conclusion: Factors for deteriorating condition of women rights under President Rouhani**

From the above it is clear that the condition of women in comparison to Rafsanjani-Khatami period has deteriorated. It is indeed paradoxical that while President Rouhani won the election on women’s agenda and enjoyed relative liberal image abroad, the condition and rights of women has increasingly been compromised under his administration. What explains this paradox? It seems that there appears to be two inter-linked reason behind the sharp decline in the condition of women rights during the Rouhani’s Presidency. The first is related to the politics of hard-liner faction (such as IRGC) within the Iranian polity. These hardliners, who dominate Parliament and are ensconced in the security, intelligence, and judicial branches of government, have focused in particular on two issues, both of which concern women’s bodies: the observance of “proper” *hejab* (Islamic dress) and the availability of family planning and women’s reproductive health services. It is argued that the surge in executions is completely conducted by hardliners to undermine Rouhani's government, scuttle the ongoing nuclear talks, and weaken the moderate position in Iran. Second, the anti-women position of hardliner factions within the Islamic Republic of Iran is further reinforced by Iran’s characterization of Arab Spring as ‘Islamic’ inspired by the Islamic revolution of Iran. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has described developments as a ‘widespread awakening of nations, which is directed towards Islamic goals.’ Using the language of ‘Islamic Awakening’ (*Bidari-ye Eslami*) seeks to find and develop commonalities between the *raison d’être* of the Iranian state and the protests, not only as a correlation to be drawn upon and exploited but as causation as well: ‘the wave of the Islamic

awakening resonated through the Islamic world as an export of the Islamic Republic of Iran,' one senior Iranian official has maintained. While the Iranian regime emphasized the 'Islamic character of Arab Spring', the post Arab Spring developments throws up 'Sunni Islamic mobilizations' against rising 'Shii influence' of Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. This has led to bitter Islamic leadership rivalry between Sunni-Salafi-Wahhabi Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Shii Iran on the other hand. In this regard it may be noted that the coming of the Rouhani government in power coincided with the emergence of radical Islamism in the post-Arab Spring. The Islamists came into power in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia at different points of time; while in Syria and Iraq there emerged a host of Islamic extremist groups such as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or what is called Dash or Islamic State) and other al- Qaida affiliated organisations. The Rouhani government, while representing the Shii Islamic State in the Islamic Republic of Iran, can not be oblivious of emerging Islamic political context in the region. One consequence of 'competing Islamism' in the region is that the Rouhani government is increasingly caught in dilemma to project its liberal- moderate face to the West to normalize relations with the West one the one hand and assert the 'Islamic identity' of its regime to manage the internal pressure of hardliner factions. The administration prefer the latter option to secure multiple objectives: to augment the legitimacy of its rule, to silence the Islamic hardliner critics of his regime's initiatives towards normalizations of relations with the west and to differentiate and assert the authenticity of Shii Islamic model as the real Islamic model vis vis Saudi led Sunni Islamic model and radical Sunni extremist Islamic model. This consideration and process led to more 'Islamization' of women life's and consequently deterioration of women rights in the Islamic republic of Iran.

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