

Interview of a German socialist newspaper with Nasrin Parsa: Are all Iranians really so “green”?

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Translator's note:

I am aware that most of my readers might not be overly surprised by what Ms Parsa has to say about the elections and the green movement. Of course, opinions like this can be heard in- and outside Iran, and the content of this interview does probably not present anything new to informed readers.

The reason why I decided to translate this interview is another one. This interview presents the green movement to German readers in a certain light, meaning that it has a whatever small influence on how the green movement is perceived in Germany. For example, an average German reader will be captured by Ms Parsa's remarks about Zahra Rahnvard and the hejab issue. Comparing wives to cars is something that immediately arouses objection in almost every reader, it subtly creates consent and thus legitimizes the rest of the interview in the average reader's mind.

Therefore, I consider this interview to be part of the things going on outside Iran that the movement inside Iran might want to be aware of. – When I was thinking about whether and why to translate this article for germantoenglish, I consulted some friends, and after one minute we found ourselves in a lively and also controversial discussion, discovering that there are always important points to talk about, even though you believe that you basically agree on everything. Articles like this might be annoying, but they give us an opportunity to grow and stay alert.

Nasrin Parsa, a publicist living in Germany since 1985, about the Iranian opposition

ND: Ms Parsa, did you travel to Iran, the country where you were born, for reasons of your curiosity as a journalist only?

Parsa: The Western countries have vehemently supported the “Green Wave” (*editor's note: this is how Parsa refers to the green-clad demonstrators against the government*).

The support was so strong that I asked myself “who are they?” In the West, and, as I

observed, also in Germany, masses of posters with the slogans of the defied presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi were spread prior to demonstrations of the opposition, most of them were printed abroad. And I think it was not cheap to have them printed.

So how “green” is the country?

I had seen pictures of the demonstrations on CNN before, and talked to friends and relatives in Iran, and I have to say that many families are divided. The media in this country always show just one side, the oppositional side. But there are demonstrations of supporters of the other side as well. I attended some of the rallies in Tehran, and I felt reminded of the times of the block confrontation. One side was chanting “Death to Russia! Death to China!” The other side was responding with “Death to America! Death to Israel!”, and also “Death to Palestine”, because people are told that it is Iran’s support for Palestinian opposition groups that plunges Iranians into poverty. Only then came the call for freedom and the demands of the social movements. There truly are enough reasons for the people to stand up, but I saw “foreign interests” dominating “our demonstrations”.

How do you explain the protests against Russia?

They reflect the views of “foreign broadcasting stations”. Both Washington TV and Voice of America (VoA), both broadcasting in Persian, are financed by the US government. These media feel obliged to confront China and Russia. For them, Russia is a synonym for Stalin, China for Pol Pot [*sic*]. And many people believe it. They also are anti-Russia because Russia was one of the first countries of the world to acknowledge Ahmadinejad’s re-election, and because Iran and Russia have a nuclear cooperation. All this is repeatedly mentioned on VoA. However, it is worthwhile remembering the original reasons for the demonstrations: It was about the results of the presidential elections and the question whether Ahmadinejad is the legitimate winner of the election or not. And the Iranians have used the elections, and then the demonstrations, also to express their dissatisfaction with the development over the past 30 years.

For example what?

After the Islamic Revolution, certain groups of the population were stigmatized and oppressed. The first group to be tackled by the new regime in this way was the women. After the women, the critical student movement was targeted by the state. And in the 90ies, there were ominous serial murders of oppositional journalists and writers. Iran is suffering from corruption, inflation, unemployment, and organized crime. Thus, there were manifold reasons to protest against the government. In my perception, a large majority nevertheless voted for Ahmadinejad.

Who, in your opinion, supports Ahmadinejad, and who is opposes him?

To make it short: I think that the “greens” got the votes of large parts of the middle class, especially in Tehran. It was above all the Bazaris, the tradespeople, who supported the “Green Wave”: by management and promotion. Whereas for Ahmadinejad voted above all the poor people, the lower middle class and the socially deprived. When you leave Tehran and go to smaller cities and villages, you will notice that hardly anybody talks against Ahmadinejad – on the contrary. Many still remember the years of the American presence. Their nightmare is to be bombed by them, and in the face of this trauma of new threats they consider Ahmadinejad to be the fist against the USA.

What does the middle class expect from the opposition?

One example: I know a wealthy family who now is supporting the “Greens”, they are old friends of Ayatollah Khomeini. In his lifetime they gave him “zakat”, the charity tax which is one of the basic duties of every Muslim. Today they say that they do not want the system to be changed, however, they want their rich foreign customers back that they do not have right now.

What about all the young people who demonstrate against the government?

Many of them are unemployed and have no perspective. On TV they barely watch anything other than music channels like MTV. Therefore, they are very fixated on the West that they know only as the “golden” one from what they see on TV.

Other than the generation of the revolution, they are barely shaped by ideology. This year already 250 book stores had to close – not because the government banned them, but because they did not have enough customers. Unfortunately, a growing number of Iranians does not read books and hardly ever reads newspapers.

Maybe they would like to read different books?

I don't think that this is the main reason. There are far fewer restrictions in Iran than people in Germany believe. For example, many bookstores in Tehran display the Communist Manifesto in their windows, and you can buy posters of Che Guevara. When I talked about this with a young woman, a student of literature, she asked me: “Who is Che Guevara?” She did not know him.

And this is the real problem of Iran. On TV, everything is about religion. Literature? Zero. Art? Zero. Children and adolescents barely learn anything except religion.

When I was 15, I wrote my first critical essay. Afterwards my father and I were summoned to the Savak, the secret police of the Shah. Only at home, through my father, I learned something about politics, social equality and things like that. Now, however, people have

other opportunities. You can not compare it with the ruling of the Shah until 1979. At that time, that I experienced myself, people were killed when it was discovered that they possessed the Manifesto. Today everyone can read it in Persian. And we have many translations of other marxist and socialist writings. The best address for this kind of books is the University Street in Tehran.

Foreign influence on the media today takes place first of all via electronic media. However, the main reason why Iranians prefer foreign media is that their own, Iranian programs are so boring.

Let's go back to the Iranian women. You said that the women were the first to suffer from the Islamic Revolution.

That's true. Nevertheless, the women have fought to get back a piece of their freedom. Inch by inch, they have "shifted" their headscarves. Over the years, the headscarf has moved "backwards" about 30 centimeters. And in case the controllers do indeed find faults with the fit of the scarf, they simply say "oh, it slipped just now".

Outside Tehran they are more strict though. The enforced compliance with religious codes today is first of all a tool to discipline the people and force them to keep still.

Rallies of the opposition still take place, but noticeably less than in the summer. Is the wave of protests gradually subsiding?

The confrontations will go on, because the problems have not been solved. And the people are no longer afraid to take to the streets. Many have started to believe in themselves again, and that they actually can bring about a change. Moreover, an idea was born: We want green! However, the problem of the mouthpieces of the "Greens" – Mir Hossein Moussavi and his supporter, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani – is that they do not have a program for the country. Most "Greens" do not specify their goals. In my mind I call them bio-islamists, because I believe that many of their slogans will expire soon.

And some of them take liberties with their former lives. Look at Zahra Rahnavard, for example. She was the first female Iranian to become a chancellor of a university after 1979, and she is Moussavi's wife. In this country she is presented as a "woman of the revolution". However, once she wrote the book "A veil for the muslim woman". In this book, the problem is presented approximately like this: Imagine you buy a new car. You will certainly park it under a roof in order to protect it. The situation for a veiled woman is very similar. She ought to protect herself from the harmful environment by a veil...

The woman who wrote this is now regarded as the spearhead for women's rights? Once she called for gender segregation in public. Today she walks in with a colorful headscarf

and in tights. It was especially CNN who presented her like that. During the interview, she constantly adjusted her headscarf, moving it to the front of her head, because it was so colorful. I say: headscarf is headscarf, no matter if colorful or not.

The political struggle highlights the differences between both camps. Are there actually positions in which Ahmadinejad and Moussavi agree, for example the nuclear issue?

The opposition does not talk about this. Moussavi, though, said we do not need atom [*literal translation of "wir bräuchten kein Atom" – "atom" is not specified*]. I assume that Moussavi, if he was president, would meet the wishes of the West.

Right now we see that every Iranian who does something that attracts international attention is awarded a prize – as long as it can be assumed that he supports the opposition. Why? We did have excellent artists before, but they were barely noticed. Since two years ago this has changed. A photographer, for example, received a Golden Bear in Rome. She came in green clothes. This makes art look suspicious.

This will probably last until the end of the presidency of the incumbent. Do you actually believe that he manipulated the election results?

Everything can happen in Iran, so of course everything can happen in the elections. But it is impossible to manipulate 11 Million votes. However, I suppose that without a fraud there would have been a second ballot. That's what the hardliners were afraid of.

One thing, however, is certain: A social movement has started in Iran that can not be stopped!

Interview: Roland Etzel

Nasrin Parsa lives in Frankfurt/Main, where she studied media sociology after leaving Iran, the country of her parents, in 1985. That was right in the middle of the war. Saddam Hussein's Iraq had attacked his neighbor Iran in 1980 in order to annex the province of Khuzestan in south-eastern Iran that is populated mainly by Arabs, hoping to be able to do this without encountering significant resistance from Tehran that was weakened after the turmoil of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The war ended in 1988 with the defeat of Iraq. At that time, Parsa was already abroad – fortunately, since in the last year of the war the invaders temporarily were in her home town Kermanshah as well – and in its wake, a part of the Iranian opposition in exile.

Today, the core of this opposition is barely weaker, but much farther away. In Germany,

this core is also represented strongly, even more, loudly. They call themselves National Resistance Council Iran (NRWI), also known as the Mojaheddin of the People, and are considered to be the voice of Iranian exiles.

Before, during, and after the presidential election in Iran, the NRWI organized numerous demonstrations, hunger strikes, panel discussions, and other public events. The Iranians in exile all over the world really have left little undone to make it clear that they consider the result of the elections of 12. June in their former home country to be manipulated; rigged by the former and current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Nasrin Parsa has been more a little more cautious from the beginning, also concerning the Iranian opposition's allegations of electoral fraud. But she wanted to have a closer look and therefore travelled to Iran herself.