

Nonviolence in Iran

By José de Vries

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When I visited Iran in December 2008, I was welcomed by a one-of-a-kind hospitality and warmth —no axis of evil, no hatred against Western countries. The Iranian people approached me with an open attitude, being very interested in what I thought of Iran. They urged me to share my positive impressions of Iran with other people, in order to change the somewhat negative impression that many people had of Iran.

I spoke with a lot of young people, very aware of the image that Iran had in the 'outside world.' I listened to stories of people who loved their country, but who were dissatisfied with its regime. One of the statements that I heard most often was, *"Iran is great, I love my country, but we don't like the wrong impression of Iran that's given to the outside world. I watch BBC News, as well, via satellite and I see the image that we have here. It's not how Iran is. People are friendly and we are very open. We want change."* Of course, I can't rightly claim that this is the overall general perspective of all the Iranian people. But I do know that the outcome of the 2009 elections does not represent the atmosphere that I felt when I was in Iran.

When I was there, I felt the energy of young people that wanted and needed change. Nearly two out of every three people is under thirty. Many of them highly educated, including many women. A hope for change is what brought millions of women and men to the ballot boxes. A hope for change brings these same people to the streets now. Demanding their rights and demanding their votes to be heard.

On Friday June 19, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei banned protests, which prompted street violence in which reportedly at least 10 people died. The use of violence against the demonstrators is increasing. It has become increasingly difficult for official journalists to do their work in Iran, since they are not allowed free access. However, new media tools such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook have provided the people on the streets with the opportunity to become journalists themselves, to tell their stories and share the experiences from inside the system. Activists inside Iran can in turn follow the protests that their diasporic friends and relatives are organizing in various parts of the world. The power of the people, united in their nonviolent struggle, is the same power that has been at work in other countries at different times. However, the astonishing use of the latest information and communication technology to protest peacefully in this 'Green Twitter Revolution' is groundbreaking in history.

The IFOR Women Peacemakers Program supports the US Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR USA) in its appeal to the demonstrators to affirm that the protests and demonstrations are done in a nonviolent manner. Also, the WPP strongly condemns the use of violence and force by the Iranian government and police against unarmed, nonviolent demonstrators. The use of violence can only lead to more violence, not to a sustainable, peaceful situation.

On June 17, FoR USA issued a statement entitled 'Active nonviolence is key in resolving the conflict over Iran's election outcome.' This statement can be downloaded from their website: <http://www.forpeace.net/blog/active-nonviolence-key-resolving-conflict-over-irans-election-outcome>

For more information on Iran, we encourage you to visit the following website:

- 1 Million Signatures Campaign: <http://www.sign4change.info/english/> . This website includes a "Statement in Protest Against Recent Events," signed by nearly 250 members of the women's movement.
- BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8112812.stm
- Roozonline.com: <http://www.roozonline.com/english.html>. This contains a selection of various articles in English

For more information on nonviolence, we advise you to read:

- *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* - Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth's in-depth study on why civil resistance works in International Security, volume 33, issue 1, pages 7-4: http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/PDF/IS3301_pp007-044_Stephan_Chenoweth.pdf