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February 11, 2008

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Commentary

Influential Women's Magazine Silenced in Iran

*Run Date: 02/10/08**By Maura J. Casey
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Iran has just closed Zanan, an influential women's magazine that covered international politics, prisons, Islamic law; never chocolate cake. Maura Casey says the closure could be temporary; if not, it's a terrible loss.

Editor's Note: *The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--Iran's most influential women's magazine, Zanan, has become the latest victim of a government intent on censoring, harassing and imprisoning opponents, journalists in particular. Officials accused the monthly journal of damaging society by being too negative toward Iran and closed the publication Jan. 28.

Zanan is hardly alone, of course. Iranian courts have used similar rationale to close many scores of newspapers and magazines in the last 10 years, particularly those that called for free speech and greater civil liberties. But Zanan, which means "women" in Farsi, was one of a kind; it was the only serious women's magazine in Iran and had a wide following, both in Iran and around the world.

Zanan's crusading editor, Shahla Sherkat, who lives in Tehran, founded the magazine 16 years ago to explore serious topics that affect women in the Islamic Republic: politics, women in prison, international issues affecting women and the impact Islamic law has on women's lives. Sherkat also ran book reviews, stories about women in sports and health issues, among other topics.

I met Sherkat while I was working on an exchange program between New England and Iranian journalists. Sherkat, a member of the delegation, wound up staying in my house in rural Connecticut.

She was interested in everything. She interviewed female lawyers here and toured a domestic violence shelter. She even asked to tour my neighbor's dairy farm, and climbed over fences to examine newborn calves, being careful



An early cover
of Zanan

to lift the flowing robes of the manteau, a loose, ankle-length coat, that she always wore.

No matter how busy we got, Sherkat always paused several times a day to pray, bowing east in the direction of Mecca.

She is very serious about her work and her magazine. There was never a chocolate cake on the cover; no recipes; no "kitchen tips," as she once told me, smiling.

She published a feminist magazine in a country where women must wear the veil in public on pain of imprisonment and where courts view women to be only half of a man in the eyes of the law.

Survival Story

Both Zanan and Sherkat were survivors. Many journalists were amazed that Sherkat managed to keep her magazine open so long, especially since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005. In the last 18 months alone the government has closed 42 magazines and newspapers, according to Fariba Amini, the editor of the Persian version of IJNet, a Web page for the International Center for Journalists, based in Washington.

"Shekat knew how to walk the red line," Camelia Entekhabi-Fard, an Iranian journalist, said on Feb. 6.

The "red line" is code for the boundary in Iran between writing the truth in acceptable and unacceptable ways. "Walking that line is an art form," Entekhabi-Fard said, one that Sherkat understood better than anyone.

Entekhabi-Fard moved to New York City in 2001 after she suffered imprisonment for her stories in the women's daily newspaper, Zan. Before that, Islamic courts shut down Zan in 1999 for publishing a cartoon ridiculing Islamic law that values women's lives as being worth less than the lives of men.

Sherkat combined her own unique qualities of fearlessness with a sophisticated sense of what to say and when to say it. Her devout belief in Islam gave her a sixth sense of what words and phrases would prove acceptable, and which would invite retaliation.

Superb Navigator

"She has gotten warned several times, she has gone to the court several times," said Dr. Nayereh Tohidi, chair of women's studies at California State University at Northridge. "But she knew how to navigate."

Until now.

Only time will tell whether the shutdown is temporary or permanent. If it's temporary it could be because the press advisory board that shut down Zanan doesn't have the legal authority to take such a step, Tohidi said.

But the political atmosphere is becoming increasingly tense as Iran, burdened with high unemployment, inflation and food shortages, faces nationwide elections March 14.

The dozen right-wing clerics and lawyers who run the Council of Guardians--the powerful wing of the government that has veto power over parliament--and their ally, Ahmadinejad, want to ensure a conservative mandate. To make sure that happens, the council has blocked thousands of reformist candidates from running for parliament.

But Sherkat's magazine was a voice of reform particularly around elections. She was never shy about publishing the sexist rants of politicians campaigning for re-election. She wanted her readership to understand which lawmakers were most likely to support women's issues and greater freedom, precisely the kind of candidates the conservatives want to ban from office.

Intimidation Tactic

The closure of Zanan could also be designed to intimidate a women's movement that has been increasingly confrontational with the government in recent years.

Shirin Ebadi, the human rights lawyer who won the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize--a recipient of one of Women's eNews annual 21 Leaders awards in 2004--was one of a network of feminists who helped launch a campaign two years ago. The campaign seeks to gather 1 million signatures of Iranian women on petitions protesting their lack of rights under the country's law, which is based on an extremely conservative interpretation of Islamic law.

The women's movement has trained hundreds of women to educate others on their limited rights. Whether women agree to sign or not, they get a pamphlet about their second-class status. Zanan ran stories about the petition, as well as how the law discriminates against women.

Iranian women frequently disapprove of U.S. government actions, even as they express warmth toward the American people. They denounce the policies of George Bush, comparing him, in his stubbornness, to their own president, and fear that his bellicose rhetoric against Iran will lead to a U.S. invasion.

For its part, the Iranian government has gotten increasingly angry about the million signature campaign and the international attention the Iranian feminist movement has garnered, imprisoning female activists and arresting and beating women engaged in peaceful protest.

Sherkat, in the face of constant intimidation, always found a way to write about the truth of what was happening.

It will be a tragedy for Iran, journalism and women everywhere if her voice is silenced for long.

Maura Casey is an editorial writer for The New York Times.

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