Iranian activists' One Million Signatures campaign for gender justice, 2006-2008

August 27, 2006
to: September 9, 2008
Country: Iran

Goals:
To collect one million signatures, urging Parliament to reform gender-discriminatory laws.

More specifically, these goals include:

1. Equal rights for women in marriage and divorce
2. End to polygamy and temporary marriage
3. Increase in age of criminal responsibilities to 18 for both boys and girls
4. Equal compensation for bodily injury or death between women and men
5. Equal inheritance rights
6. Reform laws that reduce punishments for honor killings
7. Equal testimony rights for women among other changes

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:
- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 2nd segment:
- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 3rd segment:
- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 4th segment:
- 006. Group or mass petitions
Methods in 5th segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 050. Teach-ins

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Human Rights
Group characterization:

- activists from a variety demographics
- women's groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
There were 54 founders of the petition
Partners:
Not Known
External allies:
Not Known
Involvement of social elites:
Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- 25 initial supporters
- 54 founders

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Majles (parliament)

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not Known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not Known

**Repressive Violence:**
Threats and arrests: forty-three members were arrested including fifteen while collecting signatures. Arrests increased solidarity in the campaign.

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
The campaign was not successful in collecting one million signatures within their projected timeframe, and they only were successful in reforming one law during that time.

The campaign remained intact throughout the two years and continued to gain support after the two-year period.

There were nearly 1000 trained activists in 15 provinces, but the number of activists was much larger than the number of trained ones and everyday the support grew.

Prior to Iran’s revolution in 1979, women gained many rights that were retracted after the revolution concluded. Campaigns for women’s rights since the revolution have not sought additional rights, but wished to maintain the rights women had already earned. One such campaign was the One Million Signatures campaign, which aimed to persuade the Majles (parliament) to reform gender-discriminatory laws. The campaign also looked to educate citizens, and particularly women, about the negative impact of these laws on the lives of women and society as a whole.

Iranian women’s rights activists began the campaign after a peaceful protest with the same aim on June 12, 2006, and the campaign was officially launched on August 27, 2006, at a seminar entitled The Impact of Laws on Women’s Lives. The One Million Signatures campaign was created to apply direct force on the parliament and to foster discussion about women’s rights through face-to-face interactions. The activists also wanted to avoid another political demonstration after the violent repression that occurred after the protest in June.

The petition began with fifty-four founding members who were careful to start a grassroots movement independent from political parties, government institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There were also twenty-five initial
supports of both genders, all career paths, and all ages.

The One Million Signatures campaign wished to reform all laws that were gender-discriminatory including laws regarding marriage, divorce, number of partners, age of criminal responsibility, citizenship, blood money, inheritance, and honor killings. Each of these laws limits women’s rights and many give women only half the privileges that men receive.

Here it is important to note that the demands of the campaign were not in opposition to Islam, and the activists did not intend to be an opposition group to the government. Conversely, the campaign sought to work within the existing system to create change and to express the demands of a major segment of the Iranian population to the government. The activists also emphasized the fact that the campaign was purely a homegrown effort, which relied on the ideas and energies of Iranians, and on the personal contributions of individual members and supporters to meet its financial obligations. This fact avoided the stigma of Western influence in an Islamic culture.

The short-term goal of the campaign was to collect one million signatures to send to Parliament. However, the long-term goals were the prioritized aspects of the campaign. These included: equal rights for women in marriage and divorce, an end to polygamy and temporary marriage, the increase in age of criminal responsibilities to 18 (for both boys and girls), the right for women to pass on their nationality, equal compensation for bodily injury and death between women and men, equal inheritance rights, the reform of laws that reduce punishments for honor killings, and equal testimony rights for women among other changes. The organizers hoped that this petition would demonstrate, to both decision-makers and the public, that these demands were representative of a large part of the population.

Only Iranian nationals could sign the petition and only their signatures counted toward the one million to be presented to the Parliament. Second generation Iranians living abroad who had one Iranian parent could also sign the petition. International supporters were still able to express their support by issuing statements of solidarity or by signing the petition for international support.

Finding ways to connect to the public was a key component in the campaign’s strategy. The activists decided to take a face-to-face approach so discussion on women’s rights could take place among citizens. They also wished to change cultural attitudes, especially patriarchal beliefs deeply embedded in society, through education. The activists also believed that the laws should be ahead of cultural norms, rather than being as far behind the cultural and social realities as they were at the time.

In order to achieve its goals, the campaign had four main strategies: the collection of signatures through door-to-door contact and dialogue with individual women; the collection of signatures in places and events in which women gather, and where group dialogues could be carried out; implementation of seminars and conferences with the intent of raising the profile of the campaign, promoting dialogue, identifying supporters and collecting signatures; and collection of signatures through the internet. The training and workshops held in Tehran and other provinces were meant to familiarize the volunteers with the laws, face-to-face approaches, connection with the public, and safety issues. The campaign’s website, “Change for Equality,” was also an important component because it documented experiences of activists so that others could learn from their experiences and have a greater impact as they continued with their struggle.

The activists faced a lot of resistance since the initiation of the campaign. The inaugural seminar, which marked its official start, was thwarted by security forces, who did not allow the seminar to take place, thus causing the seminar to occur in the streets behind the building. Future use of public space for meetings and seminars was also denied. Furthermore, the website was systematically blocked and filtered (over ten times), and media was warned not to cover the campaign, so it was very difficult for the public to gain access to news and outreach. Finally, many activists were threatened, summoned, and arrested. Forty-three members were arrested, fifteen of which were for the collection of signatures. However, these activists then took the message into prisons with the goal of improving the conditions of female prisoners. Activists of the campaign were attacked and jailed by the government thus causing the campaign to extend its two-year target to collect the full number of signatures. However, the continued repression only strengthened the campaign’s solidarity.
Although the campaign was unsuccessful in collecting one million signatures in their projected time frame, they made headway with reforming gender-discriminatory laws. In 2008, the conservative Iranian government proposed a tax on prenuptial arrangements above a certain amount, to reduce the financial burden on men, which the activists heavily protested. The bill for the tax was returned to the legislative council, citing the problematic meddling of the government in private contracts. However, its primary opposition came from the perceived promotion of polygamy in the government’s bill. The activists’ work paid off when the proposed polygamy and tax provisions were absent from the bill that was passed on September 9, 2008. Even though all of their goals have not yet been achieved, the campaign received many awards for their work including the Olof Palme Prize 2008, the Simone de Beauvoir prize, and the Global Women’s Rights award.

Research Notes

Influences:
Women in Morocco had a similar campaign for women’s rights which may have influenced the One Million Signatures campaign. (1)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Edited by Max Rennebohm (24/06/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Aly Passanante, 03/04/2011

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.
Copyright Swarthmore College.

Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Original website design and artwork created by Daniel Hunter.
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu.

Registered users can login to the website.


Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-women