

# "Happy" in Iran

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"The regime has reached a point where both sides sacrifice people: one side encourages the people to do unconventional things to show that the situation has changed and the other side suppresses them to show that nothing has or neither is going to change." — Reza Parchizadeh, political analyst, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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What is this fake charm offensive going on now in Iran? It seems the regime is divided. It also seems that Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, voted in nearly a year ago, made a considerable number of liberal-sounding promises to attract voters before the election. The most important of these focused on granting social freedoms to people, easing sanctions on Iran, and boosting Iran's economy. However, on all three, the system has not budged an inch -- especially for women.

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Violations of human rights in Iran continue full-steam-ahead. Last week, when Rouhani denounced Internet censorship and dubbed it a "cowardly means" to fight against the West's "cultural invasion," conservatives close to the Supreme Leader responded by calling censorship an instrument for protecting the Islamic Revolution.

In addition, despite engaging in protracted negotiations with the world powers over the Iran nuclear issue, Rouhani has not been able to ease the sanctions on Iran and boost the exhausted economy. Rouhani's subsidy program has also proved a near-disaster. Add to these pressures the price of gasoline, which almost doubled last month.

Rouhani, therefore, almost one year into his presidency, is under intense pressure. Voters are beginning to lose confidence in him and realize that he has not been, and probably will not be, able to deliver on his initial promises. Disillusionment is dawning upon the people of Iran.

Recently the Rouhani administration and its advocates have staged countless orchestrated and well-rehearsed events and campaigns, such as showing youngsters dancing to Pharrel Williams's "Happy" and asking women to post their pictures without a *hijab* on Facebook pages. This campaign, known as "My Stealthy Freedom," seems intended to demonstrate that President Hassan Rouhani has made good on his electoral promises to slacken the immense state pressure on social freedoms in Iran. The Rouhani administration has even misleadingly used [the President's tweet](#) from last year to say that it is the people's right to be happy.

Then why were the six youngsters arrested in Tehran for dancing to Pharrel Williams's "Happy" on a rooftop and not conforming to Islamic dress and behavior code? After repenting on the national television, they were released on bail. [The video](#), showing six Iranian young men and women dancing a carefree dance to Pharrel Williams'

popular song, "Happy," was released in YouTube around a month ago. The initial impression was that this video was a "homemade" production. Soon after, an unusual wave of media attention was directed to this video. In an [interview with IranWire](#), one of the youngsters who had danced in the video stated that the clip had been made with the aim of promoting the idea that Iran is a better place than many people in other parts of the world think.



Young Iranian men and women dancing in their "Happy" video, several of whom were later arrested for the act.

In addition, Reihaneh Taravati, the art director of this video -- who was recently arrested and then released on bail -- had earlier criticized those who show the situation in Iran as "dark." She produced as evidence the very fact that a number of youngsters had been able on their own to release such a video while living in Iran. It was later revealed, however, that the video was not homemade, and that the director of the video was none other than [Sasan Soleymani](#), the person who had made Rouhani's presidential campaign clip and had chosen purple as his electoral campaign color.

Parallel to this, on May 3, 2014, a campaign, named "[My Stealthy Freedom](#)," was launched on Facebook by the Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad. This campaign encourages Iranian women to unveil in desolate places when there is nobody around -- hence, "stealthy" -- take pictures of themselves, and post them on their Facebook profiles. However, Alinejad also claims that the word stealthy is used deliberately to show that women are discriminated against in Iran.

The page received more than 200,000 "Likes" in just a couple of days, and the news of it was widely covered in many prestigious online journals and newspapers around the world. As one commentator, Mohsen Behzad Karimi, [suggested](#), a considerable fortune and a good deal of connections must have gone into this campaign. However, Alinejad, who has strong affiliations with Iran's Reforms Front -- the main supporter of Rouhani in his electoral campaign last year -- claims that the campaign is "spontaneous," and that it had not receive funding and support from any organizations.

None of this happened without warning. As soon as the "Happy" video appeared on the internet, for instance, Reza Parchizadeh, a political analyst and scholar at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, warned against being fooled by such propaganda, and called it an attempt by the Rouhani administration and its advocates to show to the world that they have made good on their promises. As he later wrote on [his Facebook page](#): "These days it seems that

there is a covert war going on between the reformist faction and the conservative faction of the Islamic Republic, with the people being its cannon fodder. The regime has reached a point where both sides sacrifice people for their own sake: one side encourages the people to do unconventional things to show that the situation has changed and the other side suppresses them to show that nothing has and neither is going to change."

Events and campaigns such as these, while claiming to be protests against the Islamic Republic, are really just caricatures of protest. Whereas in Tunisia and Egypt social media were used to mobilize the people to protest in public and overthrow tyrannical regimes, campaigns and events such as "Happy" and "My Stealthy Freedom" only scare away the people from public protest by directing them to do the undoable far from the public eye. One does not achieve freedom by dancing on rooftops and unveiling in desolate places. Freedom is only accomplished by standing eye to eye with the forces of oppression.

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