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'The Silent Majority Speaks' Filmmaker Reveals Herself and Talks Revolution

≡ (/daily/post-type/) *By bbroooks (/daily/author/bbroooks) on April 17, 2014 in Art of the Real (/daily/category/art-of-the-real/), Film Society (/daily/category/film-society/), Interviews (/daily/category/interviews/)*

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The Silent Majority Speaks, playing at the Film Society's current Art of the Real series, is a pioneering example of why governments can no longer repress their people with impunity.

In June 2009, Iran's presidential election unleashed a fervent of civil uprisings in Tehran and beyond. Supporters of candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi (represented by the color green) was the most reformist of the four candidates vetted by the Islamic Republic's establishment and officially allowed to run. Masses of people took to the streets in a sea of green to show their support for Mousavi, who was up against the country's hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Filmmaker Bani Khoshnoudi stealthily took to the streets along with fellow demonstrators to capture the moment. The lead-up to the election was mostly peaceful, with thousands of people holding pictures of Mousavi and calling for reform.

But the official results came in, giving Ahmadinejad a landslide win. Headlines around the world said Ahmadinejad's victory came as a result of widespread election fraud. The aftermath became quite ugly. The so-called "Green Movement" took to the streets, but this time against a massive backlash by police, soldiers, and government henchmen. Khoshnoudi joined the mayhem again with her camera, though she compiled the footage as if it were being organized through a filmmaking collective ("The government fears people working together," she said). Though the events of 2009 figure prominently throughout the feature, *The Silent Majority Speaks* is actually an historical composite of over a century of a collective longing for democracy and freedom in Iran, sadly marked by periods of violence.

When it premiered at the International Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) last November, *The Silent Majority Speaks* had no filmmaker listed. Ahead of its North American premiere at Art of the Real, Bani Khoshnoudi "came out" as its director. She spoke with FilmLinc Daily about why she remained anonymous for many years and why she said the "Green Movement" is one manifestation of a 100-year-long struggle that is not over.

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FilmLinc: When did you decide to use the title The Silent Majority Speaks? *It does encompass the drama that manifested on the streets of Tehran from the relatively peaceful pre-election period to the often violent imagery that takes place afterward.*

Bani Khoshnoudi: I think the title is something that came to me much later. In general there is a feeling or [collective] thought in Iran that [a majority] is quite silent because of censorship and also fear that is a result of an authoritarian state. So, when the events happened in 2009, all of a sudden there were all these people on the street. And actually, it was before the election. It was like, "Wow, there are so many people in the streets," and I was filming at that time. I was amazed by that.

After the election, many people said what had happened was [effectively] a coup d'etat. It took a couple of days of really chaotic events, but through Facebook and word of mouth, there was this idea that everyone should go into the streets—I think it was on a Friday and the [idea was] we should be silent. It was meant to show our presence, but not attract the kind of repression that happens through what you say. It was the biggest march, I think, since the [1979 Islamic] revolution.

We don't have exact numbers, but I got up on the roof to film and it was so large, I couldn't see the end of it. It was this massive, massive thing. There were no slogans and the idea was to be together and show that we are in fact the majority, so it was a silent march and from there I came up with this title, which is of course a common expression.

FL: So you had the idea to start filming at the beginning of the election process?

BK: I began filming daily starting maybe 10 days before the election, so it was during the campaign period. There was this relative tolerance [by the authorities] at that moment, which was done to [alleviate] this pressure-cooker or [collective] tension and all people to come out and be a bit free. But of course it wasn't just banners and all that. People had real discourse and real debates. People took advantage of this tolerance from the government to really be out there. I didn't have an idea at the time that I'd make a film from this, but after seeing everything that happened and finding many people who wanted to be in front of the camera, I just couldn't stop.

FL: You use historical footage of uprisings in Iran over the past 100 years, including the 1979 Revolution and tied it into what occurred in 2009. Why did you want to include that?

BK: When we were on the streets, it was as if we were repeating something in a way. I felt it the whole time. We were repeating something our parents did and repeating something that is always very present. There was [a big event] in 1953 in Iran, and our great-grandparents were involved with the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907). It was fresh for us and we know what it's like to be on the streets together in Iran.

So when I was organizing my images and thinking about it all, I was considering how many Iranians wished there were more images of the atrocities we have lived through [over the years]. I was also provoked by the fact that everyone was filming what was going on with their phones, perhaps with the intention that they can stop the violence somehow or be able to identify people who are going to disappear or be killed.

For me, it was not just about that time, but this bigger idea about what it means to create an archive of atrocities and our history. So I thought I have to show this repetition in

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history. When you film violence and death and put it on YouTube or whatever, you wonder if it's going to provoke more violence or rage or maybe just melancholy... I've worked with images and archives in a lot of my other work, so I felt I just had to include this element of the past as well. I didn't want to do just a journalistic piece with my own images of that time.

FL: I remember seeing the images from Iran on places like CNN, which often took them from sites like YouTube and it was so unprecedented at least on that scale, and of course we saw similar imagery soon afterward with the Arab Spring in various countries. It was very unique to capture history that way...

BK: I think so too. They don't call it the Facebook Revolution or the YouTube Revolution, because it wasn't really a revolution in the context of the history of Iran. But it was a first.

FL: Was the Green Movement a culmination of something that had been building since the 1979 Revolution, or was it specifically targeted to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?

BK: Yes and no. It was targeted in part to particular things that were happening that year. Fraud is quite common in many countries and it was blatant at that time. He represented a big part of the population and he is a descendant of a certain type of thinking in Iran. But I think it was a real revolt against the situation in general. There's a historical situation... But most people in Iran believe in reform. If you overturn the system completely then we don't know what follows. The revolution in '79 was in fact that. It was a real revolution and it was taken over by certain political and religious sectors, but people were not prepared for what was [coming into place]. The result was a lot of repression that followed.

As far as the Green Movement, the color came from [Mir-Hossein] Mousavi's [campaign]. He was one of the presidential candidates along with [Mehdi] Karroubi who was a different color [and others]. But green is also the color of Shia Islam and it was really a situation where the movement just picked a color. And a "green" movement is a terminology that comes from outside as well. It was a very spontaneous time. It was a way of showing each other that we can come together, work together, and make decisions too.

FL: Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani, has been portrayed as a relative reformer and much less hardline than Ahmadinejad. Is that true? Did the establishment allow his election out of fear that another uprising would happen again? And what is the state of the Green Movement now?

BK: Well, the Green Movement didn't exactly exist. To say that if something is a "movement" then there must be some kind of organized base to it, but that wasn't the case. It was used as a description to identify what was happening, though in a way, it existed before the election. The student movement in 1999 had the same issues, but at the time it was just called "The Student Movement." But again, it's a continuation from 1906. Iran has been fighting for a certain freedom that's political, economic, and social over the past century.

Rouhani is a result of that. The way that the Iranian government functions is that they don't want to lose power and they know that there's a limit to the kind of repression they can do. That also speaks to their intelligence really, they know when it's time to allow more reformist candidates to come forward. There's a group called "The Guidance Council" and the Supreme Leader—even if they don't like it—they probably believed that if they repressed again then they would not be able to contain it. People did vote for Rouhani. People don't want to overturn everything. When you live in a repressive society there's a limit. When you can't do [simple things like] go to parties or meet people, you can't develop the necessary things that will eventually let a democracy thrive.

FL: There were some moments that were clearly frightening. How were you able to film them and how were you able to avoid being caught?

BK: Most of the things I filmed were before the vote happened so that was easier. I did decide to blur faces, even if they were speaking freely in front of the camera. They knew I was filming, but I felt I needed to protect them. I then of course filmed during the revolt after the election and, yeah, it was scary. I kept the camera in my bag and then would film a bit, and then the day when I felt I couldn't do it anymore, I just stopped. The rest of the images in the film were from mobile phones and footage I found on the Internet.

FL: Other filmmakers, such as fellow Iranian director Jafar Panahi, have faced incarceration or house arrest. You weren't always known as the filmmaker of The Silent Majority Speaks *I assume for your own protection, so why did you decide that now is a*

good time to reveal yourself as the director?

BK: I think it partly has to do with your last question about Rouhani. I'm not idealizing him at all though. I think we may be in a different time now in Iran. In a way it was partly about my own personal fear because I continue to go there and work there. And I knew if I had done it before, then I'd be pushed into this repressive "basket" like so many others. They were just trying to control their voices. But now this is an opportunity, though it is not about my personal need to say, "This is me who did it." I think that if a film like this doesn't have a director [identified] then it can be easily forgotten. There are many directors who take many risks. But to have a collective of people who do this would be like a utopia. Anything that is seen as collective like this is [intimidating] to the government. So I wanted to provoke as well to make people think that maybe there are collectives doing things like this.

I think for now, it's time to try and get the film seen again. Now that the heat has settled a little bit, perhaps it's a time where we can now talk about issues. I don't want the film to be seen as just about those days, but to be seen as something that continues. I got help from IDFA in Amsterdam and they protected my identity and gave me some money to finish the film. They showed it there in November.

FL: What do you ultimately hope for for the film?

BK: I hope to get it out there widely and to be able to talk about these issues of violence, imagery, and repetition [of history]. I want to visit our past. It's hard to talk about these moments from our past. I touch on them, including some of the mass murders that took place [in the past century], but the topics are taboo in Iran. I hope we can start to normalize these things because no matter what reforms we are able to put in place, we need to learn from our past mistakes.

We shouldn't repeat violence, and I say that going both ways. The most fascinating thing was the question of violence. There were times when people in the movement grabbed say a policeman and they would start beating him and others would then try to stop them. This was fascinating.

FL: Yes, there were moments in the film when you'd hear, "Don't beat him, don't beat him…"

BK: Exactly! Those for me are the most important things we could capture and we did capture. It's not just them and us. We are all part of the same whole. I hope we can think more deeply about the violence we provoke and the violence we accept, because it's a circle.

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