

**The Beckoning:
“Neda” and the Birth of a Revolution**

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The martyrdom of “Neda” has become the icon of Iran’s burgeoning revolution. Young and patriotic, Neda has given her life in Iran’s elusive quest for freedom. Her death has beckoned the nation to continue her fight for justice and liberty. Iranians inside and outside the country are protesting around the world no more just to make their votes count. Today, they seek something far bigger. They demand a government accountable to its people, a government that listens to dissent instead of one keen on silencing it. The image of “Neda” and of the other victims of the government’s crackdown has fueled both the public’s anger and its ardor for democracy.

That a young woman has emerged as the symbol of this inspiring movement defies stereotypes of Persian women as politically deferential. Indeed, Iranian history has been populated with many heroic Nedas. Women have informed the political debate at key junctures in Iran’s turbulent modern history. In the famous tobacco crisis of 1891, the women in the shah’s harem, along with members of the merchant and religious classes, boycotted the use of tobacco -- a popular consumer good at the time -- for political purposes. During the constitutional revolution of 1906 women demonstrated alongside the men to demand the creation of a parliament. After the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1926, women embodied the ideology of renewal that strove to re-cast the modern Iranian citizen in attire, body, and mind. Finally, under the Islamic Republic veiled women became the most conspicuous symbol of the regime’s Islamist ideology and social policies. To explain the country’s political transformations in the last century, it is imperative to understand the centrality of women to this process.

The power to engage, suppress, or re-cast Iranian women has reflected on the political strength and viability of the Iranian state. If the mandatory unveiling of women in 1936 embodied the secular nationalist objectives of the Reza Shah era the compulsory veiling of women after 1979 demonstrated the political will of the newly instated Islamic Republic. Today, women like Neda have once again given voice to the ideals of Iran and its burgeoning revolution. Neda’s valor and patriotism, like that of many other women in the streets and prisons of Iran, show that universal values such as freedom and justice easily cross firmly etched gender lines.

Neda has not died in vain. Rather, her death signals the power of patriotic womanhood in Iran. Neda has joined the pantheon of courageous and ground-breaking Iranian women – nameless or famous -- who have sacrificed their lives so that their compatriots could come one step closer to realizing the dream of democracy. Next month, Iran marks the centenary of a civil war fought in the name of freedom. How ironic that Neda and her fellow protesters have animated that struggle by fighting for the same ideals almost exactly a century later. Neda’s call to freedom resonates loud and clear. Iranians at home and abroad must insure that her beckoning will not fall on deaf ears.

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