

# Gay City NEWS

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## Banned In Tehran

By: DOUG IRELAND

The theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Monday, August 6, closed the daily newspaper Shargh for publishing an interview with a poet in exile who edits the magazine of the Iranian Queer Organization (IRQO).

Last Saturday, Shargh ran a full-page interview with Saghi Ghahreman, who edits Cheraq, IRQO's Persian-language e-magazine, distributed in PDF format via the Internet to some 5,000 subscribers inside Iran.

"The main reason for the ban was an interview with a counter-revolutionary who promotes immorality," Alireza Malekian, director of press in the Ministry of Culture, told the government-run IRNA news agency, adding, "This person is a known element who even promotes immorality in her cyber publication."

The interview with Ghahreman, who currently lives in Canada and has had four volumes of poetry and short fiction published in Persian by the exile publishing house Afra, was entitled "Feminine Language." Ghahreman is barred from publishing in Iran.

"We had an article which was an interview with an expatriate writer. They said she had moral problems, they say she is homosexual and promotes that in her Web log," Shargh's managing director, Mehdi Rahmanian, told Agence France-Presse in Tehran. "But we talked to her as a poet," he added.

Ghahreman, did not discuss homosexuality explicitly in the Shargh interview, but said, "Sexual boundaries must be flexible... The immoral is imposed by culture on the body."

Ghahreman told Gay City News that her role with the IRQO and her views on sexual matters were simply "used as the means to shut down the newspaper."

Nayereh Tohidi, a noted Iranian human rights activist who is professor and chair of the Women's Studies Department at California State University, Northridge and a research associate specializing in Iran at the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA, agrees that the Ghahreman interview was only a pretext for closing Shargh.

"Her interview was just a kind of excuse for government to shut down one of Rafsanjani's vehicles," read an analysis by another Iran expert that Tohidi approvingly provided to this reporter, referring to Iran's former President Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served from 1989 to 1997, but was defeated in his bid for a third term by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. "The interview itself was pretty lame," the analysis continued.

Shargh had only returned to the newsstands in May following a nine-month ban for publishing a cartoon deemed offensive to President Ahmadinejad.

Ghahreman, in her interview with Gay City News, said, "My poetry fiction both deal with sexuality, women's sexual orientation, my tak ethics, homoerotics, and such."



The regime of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad closed a Tehran newspaper after it ran an interview with the ex-poet and activist Saghi Ghahreman.

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She continued, "One of my aims has been to break the taboos on we allow words, the names of body parts, and sexual terms into my po redress culture through redressing the usage of words, and give the respect they deserve."

The hard-line conservative daily Kayhan, which reflects the views of Ahmadinejad fundamentalist ayatollahs who dominate the Council Guardians - that controls politics and government in Iran - said on 1 that Ghahreman was "head of the Iranian homosexuals' organization" "counter-revolutionary fugitive."

"Media observers believe that Shargh has interviewed this homosexual aware of her sick sexual identity, dissident views, and porno-personor added the ultra-conservative daily, which is known for its repeated Iran's more moderate press.

Ghahreman described her relationship with the IRQO to Gay City 1

"In the summer of 2006, when PGLO [Persian Gay and Lesbian Or IRQO's name until this past March] decided to register in Canada, I joined the organization and became editor of its monthly m Cheraq, and right after became involved with the organization as one of its founders here," she said.

PGLO was founded in Iran in 2003 by Arsham Parsi, currently its executive director, and a group of LGBT Iranians. Last year, several years of exile in Turkey, Parsi was granted asylum in Canada as a sexual refugee, and moved the PGLO-IRQO headqua

"It was important at the time to support the cause of Iranian queers," Ghahreman said of her association with IRQO, adding, "A queer poet, I'd been writing about the issue, but then a more organized work seemed necessary. Feminism goes only so far to fr identity to express her through self, so for me focusing on the queers' right to acquire their rights goes beyond feminist theories continues past queer ideas. So I couldn't and shouldn't stop myself from working and writing as a queer."

Ghahreman described Cheraq as "focusing on LGBTQ issues, from the news about the community, the literature produced by q everything of concern to the Iranian queer community. Also, we try to build a connection between the mainstream Persian liter: what we call queer literature, to give the two branches of art and literature a chance to know each other."

In denouncing Shargh and Ghahreman, Kayhan also accused her of being "a CIA agent" - a charge frequently leveled these day intellectuals the Ahmadinejad regime and its supporters dislike. But the only evidence Kayhan cited for its allegation was that Ghahreman's brother works for Freedom House.

Sasan Ghahreman is the editor of Gozaar, a magazine published in Persian and English by Freedom House. The magazine's We its funding is "provided mainly by The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs." Idaho Democratic Senator Frank Church's 19' Select Subcommittee on Intelligence heard testimony that Freedom House acted as a conduit for CIA funds and activities durin War. Freedom House, whose board of directors these days is dominated by neo-conservatives, currently receives substantial U. government funding through the National Endowment for Democracy.

But Saghi Ghahreman told this reporter, "Queer Iranians are also Iranians, and I don't believe any Iranian would want to have a do with anything coming from the Bush administration. You can find no one in Iran who is not ready to fight any interference f governments outside. So, if Western LGBTs are willing to help the cause of Iranian queers, it's very important to make clear the relationship to the U.S. government. The help that comes to us should be through people and human rights organizations."

The poet said she fled Iran in 1982 at the time of a crackdown on the Iranian Communist Party, Tudeh, by the Ayatollah Ruholl Khomeini's fundamentalist regime, in which some 5,000 Tudeh members were arrested, and an untold number executed.

"I was involved with the Tudeh Party's Women's Branch. I was 22 at the time," said Ghahreman, who is now 50 years old. "I w three months before the mass arrests of Party members in 1982, and was released the same day after they took evidence from m I'd been told they'll come again to deal with us in two months. When the mass arrests began and Party members were obliged to themselves, many of us were ordered by the remaining Party contacts to leave Iran. I went into hiding for four or five months b Iran through the mountains, and went to Turkey as a refugee. It took me five years to get a visa to Canada."

Ghahreman comes from what she calls "an upper middle-class family. My father was an M.D. specialist, and my mother was a although she didn't publish. I studied Persian literature at Tabriz University, but before the end of my last semester, the Khoem cultural revolution took place and all universities were closed for cultural cleansing."

Commenting on her same-sex orientation, Ghahreman said. "I was always aware of it, since I was a teenager, but at the time I thought it was normal, I thought everyone was like that. The difference became clear to me after I got married to my boyfriend, when I was given a name when I came to Canada. I was always comfortable with my attraction to other women - the problem was only explaining it to men."

"I like to call myself bisexual," Ghahreman said, "not because I am attracted to both sexes but because I am not certain at any point whether I am a woman or man attracted to the person. I waver between genders in myself when relating to the other person. I am attracted to both of them, and I am both - and I am attracted to individuals not because of their gender. Maybe I am only queer, wavering between genders and attractions."

Ghahreman's poetry and short fiction, only a few items of which are in English, can be read on her Web site at <http://www.nevi.com>

Doug Ireland can be reached through his blog, DIRELAND, at <http://direland.typepad.com/direland/> . The Iranian Queer Organ (IRQO) Web site is <http://www.pglo.net/> .