

bond among us that transcends culture, history, nationality and language," she writes. She shows both their helplessness and their power. In public life Iran's women must not be visible. Their heads and bodies must be covered. They may be beaten for violations of these rules. In private and family matters, Islamic law puts them at a disadvantage. Although it is easy for a man to obtain a divorce, a woman can get one only in extreme circumstances, and the husband is given custody of all but the youngest children. Husbands can also take second wives or arrange "temporary marriages," which are religiously acceptable. Nonetheless, women fill almost all the roles of a modern society. More than half of Iranian university students are women. Women work, drive, own property, have access to birth control and vote. Moreover, the book notes, women "are experts in finding ways around the constraints of the male-dominated system." Ms. Sciolino found everything from gender-segregated parties to beauty salons to a woman who ran a gambling business in her apartment, where women in low-cut dresses drank and danced to heavy-metal music.

This activity is very dangerous. There is always the possibility of an unexpected intrusion by the morals police, perhaps just to extort a bribe, perhaps to arrest the participants. The insecurity is deeply resented.

Women also show extraordinary courage in fighting the system. Azam Taleghani, the publisher of the weekly newspaper Payam-e Hajar, is committed to Islam and the revolution but challenges clerical ideas of male supremacy and promotes a more feminist interpretation of the Koran. Another activist, Faezeh Hashemi, published a newspaper until it was banned and now promotes sports programs to combat depression among women and to encourage them to fight for their rights.

Minorities do not fare well at all, but are nonetheless loyal to the Iran of their ideals. Zoroastrians and Christians are barely tolerated. Jews are accepted in business, medicine, engineering and law, but anti-Semitism is widespread, and the government maintains incessant anti-Israeli propaganda. Bahá'ís are persecuted relentlessly. Their marriages are not recognized by the state. Their property has been confiscated. They have been expelled from the universities and many have been executed. But even under this pressure, the religious minorities are loyal. Jews — Persian is their native language — feel profoundly, truly Iranian. And a Bahá'í engineer says: "I am Iranian. I love this country."

Courage and love are essential because the authorities are powerful and oppressive. The clerical establishment, headed by the supreme leader, now Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, controls the judiciary and large sectors of the economy. A vast apparatus of military, police, intelligence officers, morals enforcers and organized vigilantes is

used to crush drugs, gambling, homosexuality, prostitution, rape, murder, spying, counter-revolutionary activities and "sowing corruption on earth." Above all, it punishes women for being improperly dressed in public. Recently Iranian journalists and students have been beaten and killed.

Still, the authorities have not been able to check the demand for a transformation of the Islamic Republic into an Islamic democracy. There is a vigorous though embattled press. Guardedly, young people, women and intellectuals, including many liberal clerics, struggle for the future. Recent elections gave 70 percent of the seats in parliament to liberals, but they are still paralyzed by the powers of the conservatives, and it is not yet clear who will win. Although the struggle is sometimes framed as a conflict between Persian and Islamic identities, religion and popular culture, clerical rule and freedom, dictatorship and democracy, in this supple and sophisticated country even liberals accept the Islamic state. Looking beneath the surface, Ms. Sciolino makes us aware of deeper currents flowing toward political compromise and synthesis.

Iranians, she points out, have a love-hate relationship with the United States. In politics it is the Satan that opposed Iran in the war with Iraq, shot down a civilian airliner, orchestrated an embargo and sides with Israel. Yet America, avidly consumed on television, audio and videocassettes and computer software, is the country of Iranian dreams. It embodies their fantasies of a good life. American relations with this fascinating nation hold unanticipated possibilities.

Through the eyes of Ms. Sciolino, we see a culture of paradoxes: a nation that is open and welcoming but remains hidden and mysterious; a clerical dictatorship but one of the Middle East's liveliest democracies; a puritanical regime but a people who love everyday life; a severe orthodoxy but an expressive cinema and an argumentative press; a state that makes control of women its first concern but whose women are powerful as personalities and even subversive; a revolution that has rejected secularism but a nation heading toward a fusion of Islamic and Persian identities. First and foremost, Ms. Sciolino shows Iranians as human beings trying to cope with an unusual and very difficult situation. For this wise perspective the reader is grateful.

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