The Stop Stoning Forever Campaign: A Report

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Women Living Under Muslim Laws

The Stop Stoning Forever Campaign

On May 7, 2006, two individuals were stoned to death in Mashhad, Iran.\(^1\) Mahboubeh M. and Abbas H. were found guilty of murdering Mahboubeh’s husband and committing adultery with each other, for which they were sentenced to stoning.\(^2\) The public was not invited to the executions carried out in Behesht Reza grand cemetery and the incident was not reported by local news sources. Eventually news of the event was spread by word of mouth to Asieh Amini, journalist and women’s rights activist, who then went to Mashhad to gather information and report on the incident, thereby exposing news of the event to the world.\(^3\)

In response to the stonings of these two individuals, women’s rights activists formed the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign in cooperation with the Network of Volunteer Lawyers in order to abolish the law of stoning in Iran. Much like the One Million Signatures Campaign, these activists acknowledge that discriminatory laws are harmful toward women, and question their legitimacy. But unlike other movements, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign does not target said laws for direct change. Instead, the abolishment of stoning becomes the cornerstone of their demands, and stoning itself becomes a symbol for a broader patriarchal culture that is drawn into question. The Campaign has evolved from a small group of activists fighting individual stoning cases to a transnational model and growing force in the contemporary Iranian women’s rights movement.

\(^1\) Stop Stoning Forever Campaign. “About the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign.” Meydaan-e Zanan.
\(^2\) For the crime of murder, Abbas was sentenced to ghasas, or retaliation, while Mahboubeh was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for being an accomplice.

Background on the Practice of Stoning

Stoning, or lapidation, refers to a method of execution in which an organized group throws stones or rocks at the person they wish to execute. Although it takes many different forms, stoning has been used throughout history and in many religious and cultural traditions as a kind of community justice or capital punishment. For instance, the practice has been documented among the ancient Greeks to punish people judged prostitutes, adulterers or murderers. It is also documented in the Jewish Tradition via the Torah, the fifth five books of the Bible, and the Talmud, or Jewish Oral Law. In the Old Testament of the Bible, stoning is prescribed a method of execution for crimes such as murder, blasphemy or apostasy.

While there is very little historical evidence documenting incidents of stoning in modern times except in rare occurrences, the practice has since grown to be associated with Islam and Muslim culture. Although there is no mention of stoning in the Quran, many Muslim clerics site instances in the Hadith, the acts and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, when discussing the legitimacy of the practice of stoning in Islam. In the Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have prescribed stoning explicitly for Jews who had been found guilty of adultery. Although the Quran (24:2 Surah a Nur) only stipulates 100 lashes for adultery, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly stoned a number of men and women in his time, hence codifying this punishment as Shariah, or Islamic

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5 See the Bible, Old Testament, Deuteronomy 13:6 to 13:10
Law. After the Prophet Muhammad’s death, the first generation of Muslim legal scholars included adultery as one of the six major offences in Islamic law for which the penalty is fixed by God and Quran (Hudud.) However, because the justification for stoning relies completely on the Sunnah and not on the Quran, many scholars question its label as Hudud, the very definition of such being “punishments mandated by God.” Such inconsistencies between the Hadith and Quran became a source of confusion and debate continuing until the modern day.

Of all the Muslim-majority countries, stoning as a form of punishment is only provided in the criminal codes of Iran, United Arab Emirates, and the Sudan. In Iran, stoning as a punishment did not exist until 1983, when the contemporary Islamic Penal Code was ratified. The Code prescribes stoning as the punishment for adultery and is very specific about the details of the execution. Article 102 states that men shall be buried up to their waists and women up to their breasts for the execution. Article 104 states, referring to the penalty for adultery, that the stones used should “not be large enough to

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6 According to Alasti, “the Hadith present Muhammad as initially prescribing stoning explicitly for Jews who had been found guilty of adultery than later referring to the Jewish law whenever passing similar sentences on members of his own community.” Alasti, Sanaz. “Comparative Study of Stoning Punishments in the Religions of Islam and Judaism.” Justice Policy Journal. Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2007. The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice.

7 Stoning was mentioned in the Pakistan Hodoud Ordinances, until recently. Furthermore, there have been incidences of stoning in Iraqi communities and in Nigeria.

8 Although it may have been performed in ancient Iran, we did not come across any documentation to its precedence as a punishment during this era. After the invasion of Arabs in Iran caused the criminal justice system to collapse, a mix of local tradition and what was believed to be “Islamic law” was gradually established as Muslims spread the religion across the area. However, it is believed that stoning was not practiced in Iran and remained mostly within the scholarly religious debate until Shariah Law based on Twelve Imam Shiism was instituted in the early 1980s.

9 Article 83 of Iran’s Islamic Penal Code

Article 63 of the Islamic Penal Codes indicates that adultery applies to an illicit sexual act where at least one of the parties is married to a third party. It does not include premarital fornication, although this too is illegal. Specifically, the article states: “Adultery is the act of intercourse, including anal intercourse, between a man and a woman who are forbidden to each other, unless the act is committed unwittingly.” However, this definition is itself subject to debate as some Muslim jurists argue that adultery should not be applied to instances in which the married person is unable to consort with their spouse due to legally accepted conditions such as prolonged travel or life imprisonment.
kill the person by one or two strikes; nor should they be so small that they could not be
defined as stones (pebbles.)”\textsuperscript{10} In some cases, if a victim can escape from the ditch during
the stoning, they will be freed. However, because women are buried up to their breasts
and men only at their waists, women will have a smaller chance of escaping than men.\textsuperscript{11}

Just as stoning elicited intense debate in the early years of Islam, it continued to
be a source of serious controversy in the early years of the Islamic Republic. Some
Muslim clerics such as Ayatollah Hussein Mousavi Tabrizi argued that stoning should be
stopped as a response to the demands of modern age.\textsuperscript{12} Any punishment, including
stoning, that defames, embarrasses or depicts a bad picture of Islam is harmful to the
religion and should be discontinued.\textsuperscript{13} Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, in her
discussion of the practice, point out that many religious leaders see stoning as an
“endorsement” law that can be changed, as opposed to a “constitutional” law; and that
many other Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria do
not condone stoning.\textsuperscript{14}

Furthermore, many Muslim jurists are of the opinion that while stoning can be
considered Islamic, the conditions under which it can be sentenced are nearly impossible
to occur.\textsuperscript{15} Because of the large burden of proof needed to reach a guilty sentence of
adultery, its penalty is hardly ever applicable. Furthermore, while legally on the books, because of the enormity of both domestic and international controversy and outcry over stoning in the early years of the Islamic republic, the government placed official moratoriums on the punishment and, as a result, it was rarely practiced. Nevertheless, much of the public was outraged that such a backward and tortuous ritual became instituted in the laws of their country; finally, in 2002 the Ministry of Justice indicated that stoning will no longer be practiced in Iran. It was only after the election of president Ahmadinejad and the defeat of the reformist movement that the practice was revived.

The Launching of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign

Since the ratification of the Islamic Penal Code in 1983, Iran has been pressured by many domestic and transnational forces, including the United Nations, international non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, and the European Union to ban its stoning practice. In December of 2001, the UN General Assembly expressed its concern about the “growing number of executions in the absence of respect for internationally recognized safeguards and, in particular, public and especially cruel executions such as stoning.” At the same time the international community was taking notice, Iranian women’s rights activists such as Shadi Sadr were mobilizing campaigns domestically to pressure the government on its stoning stance.

In December of 2002, while in the course of negotiation with the European Union, Iran imposed a moratorium on stoning under the direction of Head of the Judiciary Ayatollah Shahroudi, while keeping the law officially on the books. Despite their disappointment with the government’s lack of willingness to abolish the stoning
law, many women’s rights defenders involved in the Anti-Stoning Campaign saw the moratorium as a great achievement. Others did not want to push the issue further for fear of backlash. However, after several years of inactivity, activists concerned with the issue were once again sprung into action after news leaked to the public about the stonings of Mahboubeh M. and Abbas H. in Mashhad. It became clear that the Ayatollah Shahroudi’s ban, because it was never codified in law, failed to prevent all stoning cases.

In June of 2006, only a month after the stonings of Mahboubeh M. and Abbas H., a woman by the name of Ashraf Kalhori was handed an official notice giving her fifteen days notice of her execution by stoning. After hearing about the sentence, it became clear that the ban on stoning was not all encompassing, and there existed other cases. Shadi Sadr and others from the Network of Volunteer Lawyers initiated a search for prisoners across the country with stoning sentences, and after two months of research, nine women and two men were identified. Some members of the Network of Volunteer Lawyers decided to represent these eleven prisoners in order to try to save them from being stoned to death, while others gathered with women’s activists and non-governmental organizations to form the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign in order devise a coordinated effort to change the Islamic Penal Code of Iran such that stoning will never again be sentenced or practiced as punishment. As of August of 2006, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign was officially launched in Iran to eradicate the law of stoning.

16 Different publications and articles have translated this person’s name as Kolheri, Kolhari, and Kalhari
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
The Evolving Goals of the Campaign

While the aims of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign may seem obvious by its title, in reality the campaign has been working toward multiple and evolving goals at the same time since its conception in 2006. The original focus and perhaps still the most pressings are the cases of particular prisoners in Iran facing execution by stoning. At the same time they are working on these individual cases, activists have been pursuing their other major goal: the passing of an irreversible law abolishing the ritual of stoning all together.21 On the longer term, the campaign states it wishes to highlight those discriminatory laws that lead women to commit adultery in the first place.22 Finally, the Campaign is working to transform its role in the global women’s movement in order to stop stoning worldwide and become a model for other women with similar concerns.

While most if not all of the activists involved in this campaign would like to see adultery and illicit sex decriminalized, this is not stated explicitly as a goal in their official documents. On a case-to-case basis, volunteer lawyers are clearly advocating that their clients be released from death or imprisonment for adultery, but these goals are less pronounced in their lobbying strategy. Instead, activists involved in the Campaign focus on the act of stoning as a symbol for the overall structure of the Iranian Penal Code, Family Law, and overall society that harms women.23 To many involved in the Stop

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22 Ibid.
23 Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, one of the members of the coordination committee of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign, explains why the Campaign chose to target stoning from the many issues affecting Iranian women negatively by identifying three categories of opposition towards stoning, with three forms of intention and three ultimate goals and aims: political oppositions, who support the elimination of stoning to overthrow the political regime in Iran; human rights’ defenders, who wish to eliminate stoning in order to preserve human dignity; and the feminist movement, which wishes to eliminate stoning in order to eliminate discrimination against women. In the last of these groups, stoning becomes the first priority,
Stoning Forever Campaign, stoning is the worst product of discrimination and violence against women in Iran, and by targeting the issue of stoning, activists can then highlight the discriminatory laws in which it represents.

Out of the thirteen cases of stoning that the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign has appealed, eleven of those defendants are women. According to Campaign activists, women are at a far greater risk of stoning because they are at far greater risk of being found guilty of adultery. The Iranian Penal Code, particularly Family Law, privileges men with regards to age of consent, divorce, polygamy, temporary marriages, child custody, and sexual rights. For instance, a married woman has no right to divorce, a privilege which is reserved for the husband. Furthermore, women have no custody rights of their children after infancy, so many women who can obtain a divorce by proving her husband is either abusive or an addict, chose not to do so because of the loss of their children. A man can marry up to four wives simultaneously, and may establish a sexual relationship with any other single woman through a temporary marriage (sigheh) without the requirements of marriage registration, ceremony, or obligation to any possible child that may result. In addition, a woman is legally obliged to submit to her husband’s sexual demands and do her best to satisfy him sexually (*tamkin*.) Hence if a man is sexually unsatisfied or in an unhappy relationship, he has many avenues open to him to dissolve the marriage and/or satisfy his sexual needs in a different marriage. At the same time, men can marry up to four wives and establish temporary marriages without any legal obligations.

mainly focused on Islamic countries and within the context of fighting against the patriarchal systems imposed by the governments of these countries. In their view, the vast majority of stoning victims are women since the laws structurally place women at a higher risk of being found guilty of adultery.

time, a woman has far fewer legal options open to her, often driven to adultery by these discriminatory laws limiting her sexual rights and status.

After working for some time to highlight these discriminatory laws in the international community, Campaign activists within Iran became increasingly engaged with the transnational feminist movement, forming linkages to activists in the Iranian Diaspora as well as those within the geographical region and beyond. These linkages had an important role in demonstrating to them the similarities between Iranian women with those in other Muslim contexts.\(^{27}\) As political Islam continued to claim more of the public space and political structure within the region, many practices such as a stoning and honor killing had been revived. This meant that Iranian activists in the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign could link their struggle with that of other women in Muslim contexts, such as those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria, and together push for the abolition of stoning and honor-based violence.

While engaging with transnational forces, the Campaign has evolved from one primarily concerned with domestic issues to a central player in the Global Women’s Movement, serving as a model for similar activism in the region. This has marked a major change in the aims of the Campaign since its conception, from trying to receive as much international help as possible, to providing its own support and guidance to women outside of national boundaries.

*Strategies of the Campaign*

\(^{27}\) Personal Interview with Homa Hoodfar, Farida Shaheed, Vivienen Wee, July, 2007.
Activists involved in the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign have executed multiple strategies in their work to achieve the several goals listed above. Lawyers have been trying to save their clients from stoning sentences by appealing their cases and making them known to the broader public. Activists have worked to promote a law abolishing stoning by highlighting elements of the Judiciary system that makes a legal change necessary in preventing such executions. All the while, Campaign women’s rights defenders are actively engaging with public and international outreach in order to educate people on the discriminatory laws that push women into adultery and develop themselves as a model for other women in the region.

One of the most important activities of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and Network of Volunteer Lawyers has been defending potential victims of stoning and making them better known to the general public and internationally. Ever since the campaign to save Ashraf Kalhori was initiated in June 2006, Campaign activists have appealed the sentences of eleven individuals at risk for stoning, using the nuances of the law to the benefit of their clients. As Gholamhossein Raeesi, an attorney for the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign, states: “Our emphasis is on methods of proof and avoiding execution in the current situation using current legal capacities.”28 In the process, they have also publicized the flaws in the law and used international pressure to achieve sentence suspension or acquittal.

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The Islamic Penal Code of Iran is explicit in what procedures should be followed when proving adultery in court and when the stoning sentence is appropriate. As Asieh Amini explains: “If we go by the rules of Sharia, the conditions that must exist in order to prove the crime of ‘ehsan’, adultery, are extremely difficult. The burden of proof is high. Most stoning sentences are issued not on the basis of testimony or confession but on the judges “knowledge” or “intuition.” Article 105 of the Islamic Penal code of Iran allows a judge to rule according to his own intuition but only if it based on documented evidence and based on law. Oftentimes, however, these rulings are dubiously placed and problematic, as they stem from the judges’ gut feeling instead of hard evidence. As Sadr argues:

Unfortunately, despite the existence of these documented laws, in practice…the ‘judge’s finding’ has been used like a dangerous tool even more than the written laws to sentence women to the barbaric act of stoning. We know many of the legal scholars and even clergy disagree with using ‘judge’s finding’ as a way of proving guilt especially in the case of adultery. It is also known that if ‘judge’s finding’ is disallowed, one could confidently claim that 90% of the stoning sentences will have never been issued let alone carried out.

The result of the ‘judge’s finding’ allowance is that judicial system, in which no females are included, provides a loophole to the burden of proof and disrupts the consistency in issuing stoning sentences. Sadr and other campaign activists argue that in nearly all cases

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For proof in adultery cases, see Articles 63-107 of Islamic Penal Code of Iran, particularly Articles 68, requiring that a man or woman must confess to adultery four times before a judge to be sentenced to the adultery punishment; 71, annulling the punishment of killing or stoning if a person confesses to adultery and then denies it; 74, requiring the eye witness testimony of either four just men or three just men and two just women; 81, requiring the punishment to be annulled if the accused repents prior to testimony.


32 Ibid.
of stoning, the guilty sentence is not legally viable and therefore should be suspended or reversed. The crux of their argument is that as long as stoning remains a legal option ‘on the book’, women will continue to be vulnerable to the whim of independent judges and susceptible to stoning.

In conjunction with appealing these sentences, campaign activists encourage the international community to put pressure on the Iranian government and judiciary to repeal the stoning orders. Using the initial Kalhori case as an example, Shadi Sadr and other activists utilized interviews, Calls for Action, and petitions as major tools to achieve their goal of commuting Kalhori’s stoning sentence. Sadr raised public awareness of the situation by conducting multiple interviews with international news agencies and non-governmental organizations.33 She also issued a petition to Head of Judiciary Ayatollah Shahroudi calling for enforcement of the ban of stoning and the halt to Kalhori’s execution and forwarded this petition along to be circulated by transnational human rights and women’s organizations such as Amnesty International, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and Equality Now.34 The petition was signed electronically by more than four thousand people, including more than one hundred Iranian women’s rights activists,35 indicating a broad basis of public support as well as legitimacy for their claim

33 Such as “A Growing Number of Iranian Women Are Being Prepared to Be Executed by Public Stoning: Interview with Shadi Sadr.” Mehandokht Media. Translated by Lily Mazahery. July 24, 2006
34 Sadr also included a plea to the Iranian Parliament Representatives to “change the criminal law so that an extramarital relationship is not considered a ‘crime’ and that it certainly does not warrant the death penalty.” Petition, see http://www.petitiononline.com/AshrafKalhari/petition.html
within the country. Sadr was successful in bringing the Kalhori case to international attention, and as a result Ayatollah Shahroudi temporarily stayed Ashraf Kalhori’s execution. Since the start of the campaign, activists have continued using these tools in successfully suspending the sentences of four of the thirteen defendants. Some have even received full acquittal, the most publicized being Hejieh Esmailvand.

Unfortunately the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign has not had complete success in preventing the execution of all stoning sentences. In addition to the above thirteen, two other individuals have since had their cases incorporated in the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign. The Campaign broke the news of scheduled stoning of Jafar Kiani and Mokarrameh Ebrahimi on June 19, 2007 by issuing calls for action and petitions worldwide. The mass public response resulted in the order of stoning being stayed and the two defendants temporarily safe from their sentences. However, on July 5, 2007, Jafar Kiani died of stoning in Aghche-kand village near Takistan, Ghazvin. As of writing, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign is rapidly mobilizing to stop the stoning execution of Kiani’s partner, Mokarrameh Ebrahimi, from the same fate.

36 Sadr also sent an official letter to the Ayatollah Shahroudi stipulating the legal issues associated with the injustice of the stoning sentence in this particular case, along with a statement written by Kalhori personally explaining she has repented and pleading to the Ayatollah to pardon her “A Growing Number of Iranian Women Are Being Prepared to Be Executed by Public Stoning: Interview with Shadi Sadr.” Meehandokht Media. Translated by Lily Mazahery. July 24, 2006.
37 Her case was then sent to the ‘Daftar-e Nezarat va Paygiri’ (‘Office of Monitoring and Follow Up’) for review.
39 Also written as Esmalivand or Esmaiel-Vand.
41 Ibid.
The stoning of Jafar Kiani provided the Campaign an example for why a change in law was absolutely necessary in preventing more stoning executions. Judge Ashabi, who presided over the case, decided unilaterally to execute the stoning sentence, diverging from the Head of the Judiciary’s order. He was able to do this because the independence of judges is protected both in the process of issuing and executing sentences. Because Shi’a Islam does not mandate an operational hierarchy similar to that of the Roman Catholic clergy, the Head of the Judiciary, whether an Islamic Institution or not, does not have irrefutable control over lower judges and their rulings. This has given some the impression that the judicial system’s prestige is faltering. But in short, this lack of accountability mandates that unless stoning is prohibited in law, judges will continue to order it, regardless of religious opinions of their superiors in the judiciary or ministry. In all cases, judges are obligated to respect and follow the law above any procedural order.

Abbasgholizadeh summarizes this issue for the campaign, as well as offers an interpretation for why more judges in recent years have resorted to the sentence:

Since under our laws, judges are independent, one reason [for continued stonings] might be that with the new government [of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] coming to power and the change in the political atmosphere, judges who are in favor of such sentences have become more active. Therefore, we think stoning should be banned by law—otherwise judges can issue such sentences as they desire.

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43 Ibid.


As Sadr reinforces, this campaign does not have a political platform, but has as its most important goal to save the lives of women and men who are facing execution by stoning.46 By calling for a change in the laws, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign wishes to remove the issue of stoning from any political changes that may occur in the future, in the Judiciary or elsewhere.

Because politics and religion are never far removed from each other in Iran, particularly with the issue of stoning, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign has had to strategize with its language, slogans, and general rhetoric with regards to Islam and the Islamic jurisprudence. One point of contention among campaigners is how much the campaign should try to work within the framework of Islam and religious interpretations to discredit stoning. On the one hand, religious scholars have a large amount of influence in both the state and public spheres in Iran; on the other, campaign activists wonder if framing the stoning issue within the confines of Islam will alienate their supporters and do more harm than good for their campaign.

Ebadi, in her discussion of the campaign, speaks about stoning from a religious point of view.47 She points to many of the historical debates that surrounded stoning (see discussion above), and advocates an “open-minded and dynamic understand of Islam” so that we can abolish the practice.48 Members of the Fact Finding Commission on Stoning in Iran, an impartial committee of appointed investigators, have also brought up Islam in their arguments to eliminate stoning in their open letter to the Head of Judiciary

48 Ibid.
Ayatollah Shahroudi, saying stoning will lead to the “humiliation of Islam.”\(^{49}\) Besides these examples, most of rhetoric used by the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign excludes religious interpretations as a primary justification of their cause. However, this issue over religion and strategy continues to be a point of contention among campaign activists.

While the methods mentioned above have formed the main strategy of the Campaign, activists are constantly developing new approaches as new goals and challenges arise. For instance, to combat censorship issues surrounding stoning in Iran, campaign activists are focusing their attention on alternative media, especially internet resources, to spread the word. Meydaan-e Zanan is the primary website of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and is expanding its Persian and English pages almost daily.\(^{50}\) Recently, campaigners have tried to reach out to activists in Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria and other nations where stoning is either legal or practiced de facto, in order to build network ties, share resources, and broaden the bases of support. Moreover, as we discuss below, activists are also reaching out to those societies in which the rising influence of political Islam is threatening women’s rights in order to build alliance as well as to prepare for religious counter arguments in their struggle. Currently this has been a point of difficulty, as lack of financial, communication, and personnel resources on both sides provide substantial challenges. Expansion of international networking among activists in the region continues to be a primary goal among campaigners.

\(^{49}\) In their letter, they ask: “You are aware that some Shia clerics believe that in the contemporary conditions stoning can lead into humiliation of Islam, and therefore abolishing it, as ordered by the late Ayatollah Khomeini and supported by you, is necessary. With such clerical rules existing in the highest level of Islamic scholarship, how can the judges and judiciary courts of Iran still insist on executing stoning verdicts?” “The Fact Fining Commission on Stoning in Iran Writes to Judiciary Chief: Abolish Stoning Publicly and Officially!” Meydaan-e Zanan. [http://meydaan.net/English/showarticle.aspx?arid=268&cid=46](http://meydaan.net/English/showarticle.aspx?arid=268&cid=46) Date of Access: July, 2007.

\(^{50}\) For example, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign was able break and spread the news of the Kiani stoning within a matter of hours thanks to the Meydaan-e Zanan website, mass emails, and blogs.
Internationalization of the Campaign and Role of Transnational Networks

Since its conception in 2006, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign has grown significantly in international prominence. Transnational organizations and networks play a tremendous role in supporting the activities within Iran but until recently, this engagement has been mostly unidirectional. As a result of growing international commitment, the Campaign has begun to initiate a kind of global movement against stoning by developing a U.N. mechanism and activism model in order to help similar cases in the region.

Like other women’s campaigns, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign struggled to find its place in the broader movement and activists had to think strategically about what goals, methods, and alliances to utilize in order to achieve effective change. As mentioned above, the campaign chose not to focus its attention on decriminalizing adultery or illicit female sexuality but rather on abolishing the specific act of stoning alone. By doing so, the campaign was able to coordinate a broader base of public support, particularly international support, and focus more attention on a specific issue that could have a substantial chance for success.

Unlike the One Million Signatures Campaign, which created a broad agenda in order to umbrella a broad base of support, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign chose a particular issue that could strategically incorporate different international groups without alienating them by including disagreeable platforms. Stoning, being an especially abhorrent act, is a relatively easy agenda. Few political, religious, or social figures will support it, and most progressive NGOs can doctrinally oppose it. Furthermore, its
abolition is considered achievable, at least more so than amending the entire Family Law or Constitution. If successful, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign will have changed one brick in the system, which could practically, by way of network lobbying, as well as symbolically open the doors to further change.

In this regard, Campaign activists have worked to achieve immense international support by framing stoning as a human rights issue and symbolic of a greater gender inequality in a Muslim context. The Stop Stoning Forever Campaign has made sure Iran has undergone intense international scrutiny for instituting the punishment of stoning within the human rights framework. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the first of such international conventions adopted in 1948, protects individuals from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and was followed by the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights in 1966 which holds the same protection. Stoning has been considered by many to breach these provisions.\(^{51}\) In addition, the ICCPR states that a “sentence of death may be imposed only for the most serious crimes”, while adultery is generally excluded from this category.\(^ {52}\) Furthermore, the United Nations Generally Assembly adopted the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment of Punishment in 1984 in which torture is defined as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as punishing him for an act he has committed or is suspected of committed.”\(^ {53}\) Although Iran failed to sign the Convention,

\(^{51}\) Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued Calls for Actions illustrating how stoning breeches these international human rights conventions.


\(^{53}\) See Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Article 1, Paragraph 1. \texttt{<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/h_cat39.htm>
it is considered by many to have reached the level of customary law due to its strong international acceptance by more than fifty nations, including many Muslim nations. Prominent human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well the European Union, have reprimanded the Iranian government for breaching these international contracts and continuing their stoning complacency.

By devising a plan that puts stoning on the International human rights agenda, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign not only works to achieve their own goal for changes in the Iranian Penal Code, but also helps to serve other campaigns in different countries. If women’s rights activists concerned with the stoning issue attempt to build a campaign for themselves in the future, they won’t have to start from scratch. They could use the resources, experiences, and tools of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign in their own context. This benefits not only them but the Iranian campaign as well; the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign will receive even more international prominence while developing a leadership role in the Global Women’s Movement.

_Iranian State Response:_

International alliances, as vital as they are to the success of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign, nevertheless come at a price. While international alliances have become a primary source of support for the campaign, they also bring danger to campaign activists and their cause. This is true for alliances between foreign governments, international institutions such as the UN, transnational NGOs, as well as the Iranian Diaspora, much of which is quite open about their call for regime change in Iran.

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54 Moreover, the incorporation of the right to freedom from torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment into eighty-one national constitutions further renders the provision a “general principle of law” which holds countries to its provisions regardless of its signatory status.
With no internal threat of any major political opposition party or organized group, the Iranian regime’s only perceived danger is that of a ‘velvet revolution’, or widespread uprising fuelled by international and foreign groups. Hence any cooperation by women’s campaigns to international NGOs or trans-national networks has the potential to work against them, as it could signify a security threat for the Iranian government.\(^\text{55}\)

At a time when foreign relations are strained due to possible nuclear proliferation and tensions over the Iraq War, Iran is maintaining the stance that it will not be ‘bullied’ by outside forces, particularly the West or Western dominated institutions, such as the United Nations. Government officials continue to state that “we are not bound by the pressures of the international human rights [groups and] are only bound by our Sharia and law.”\(^\text{56}\) A spokesperson for the Iranian Judiciary spoke such words in response to questions regarding the recent execution of Jafar Kiani. Although he denied that the judge in this case did what was in the “regime’s best interest” by ordering the stoning sentence, he insisted that “we have a duty to practice our laws,” regardless of international pressure.\(^\text{57}\)

\(^{55}\) This was a major point of contention within the campaign itself, and left many weary of building strong international alliances, particularly with American organizations. Vahdati exemplified this tension between need for international support but the danger that comes with it with her article, “Stop Stoning in Iran, But Don’t Confuse the Issue,” in which she states: “The success of this campaign depends on international support. We Iranian women are inspired by and have been learning from U.S. women’s struggles for their rights. Now that it is time to put our learning into action, we ask for the support and solidarity of American women and men. But we do not want our outreach to U.S. people to be confused in any way with support for the policies of the current U.S. administration…In Iran, the United States has repeatedly announced its interest in a regime change and has allocated $70 million to support internal political opposition. This has caused the current Iranian regime to see the hand of the United States at work in every movement for social and legal change. Because the women’s movement is chief among these we find ourselves undermined by an air of suspicion about our genuine aims and activities”


\(^{57}\) *Ibid.*
This, however, demonstrates a notable change. Before Jafar Kiani’s stoning, government response to the issue of stoning was one of pure and consistent denial of its existence. For example, Parliamentarian Elham Aminzadeh was asked during a trip to Brussels in mid-October of 2006 about the resumption of the practice. In response, she was quoted by Iranian media as saying that stoning sentences are no longer being handed down in Iran. She also invalided the source that the EU officials were referring to for their information on the matter, Amnesty International. Denial was also demonstrated by the strict censorship within Iran even as the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign was making it an internationally well known issue. Even the word ‘stoning’ ['sangsar'] is censored in Iran.

The most obvious explanation for the change in government response is the Kiani case, and how it received so much attention that the government could no longer deny the existence of stoning cases. But perhaps a more subtle interpretation of this rhetorical change is the gradual growth in influence of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign. By giving the impression that the Iranian government has only one obligation, Iranian law, state officials leave the possibility open to a change in those laws without admitting defeat to international pressure or autonomous civil society. International pressure may be effective, but Iranian state officials are rare to admit it.

As with other women’s campaigns, the relationship between the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and the Iranian government has been complex and evolving. While the campaign has not as of yet sat down in negotiations with government officials, some

speculate that that day is not far off. Even with the growing state pressure on civil society, it is safe to say that the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign is leaving its mark.

**Conclusions**

With the stoning of Kiani, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign faced the most major crisis since its conception. To many, this failure signified the need to reassess goals, strategies, alliances and coordination within the Campaign. Unsure of how next to proceed, campaign activists reached out to the public for new ideas on strategy and coordination in their Press Release Appeal to Save Mokarrameh from Stoning.\(^{59}\) There were also many internal conversations on what the next moves should be. Questions that were brought up in these dialogues were the same basic issues that had been circulating since the campaign’s conception. How should the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign fit into wider women’s and progressive’s movements? What allies should the campaign cultivate in terms of governments, domestic organizations and Iranian civil society, as well as trans-national feminist networks, and international human rights NGOs? Should the goals of the campaign be limited to abolishing stoning, or should it include issues of illegal adultery, gender discriminatory laws, and the Iranian judicial system? Finally, and perhaps the most problematic, as the political atmosphere in Iran continues to grow darker for civil society, how should the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign proceed in order to protect its activists while still maintaining an effective level of activity? These questions have been left open by activists, as many see the need to re-evaluate the direction of the Campaign.

But while many see the Kiani case as a major set back, it can also be perceived as
the fatal flaw by the Iranian judiciary, attracting more unwanted international attention
and exposing its internal weakness to the world. As a result, the Stop Stoning Forever
Campaign can justifiably earn the label “most likely to succeed” out of the five major on-
going Iranian women’s rights campaigns. Without waiting for its immediate goal to be
realized nationally (which they hope will happen sometime in the near future,) it seems
that activists are moving to internationalise the Campaign. This will involve the
introduction of an international mechanism and set of instruments that can be used not
only by the Iranians, but any other group facing a similar situation either with their
national law or customs.

As we have seen, campaigners are already working on developing the Stop
Stoning Forever Campaign to serve as a model for other activists in the Muslim context
and play a larger role in the Global Women’s Movement. In any case, the Campaign has
reached a crossroads in its development; a place where imminent success can be seen on
the horizon, but can only be actualised depending on re-assessment of goals and
strategies. As activists scramble to come up with the next move, the Stop Stoning
Forever Campaign continues to gain ground, growing in prominence while
simultaneously searching to find its future place in the contemporary Iranian women’s
rights movement.

60 The other four major on-going campaigns are: The One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality, the
Women for Equal Citizenship Campaign, the Women for Access to Public Stadiums Campaign, and the
Women’s Charter Campaign. These campaigns are studied in detail in the full version of the article.
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