

Iranian director Tahmineh Milani speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Director Tahmineh Milani recently visited Australia to introduce her feature *The Hidden Half* (2001) at the 15th Brisbane International Film Festival. One of Iran's best-known female filmmakers, Milani has made nine features, including *Children of Divorce* [1989], *The Legend of a Sigh* [1991], *What Else Is New?* [1992], *Kakadu* [1996], *Two Women* [1999], *The Fifth Reaction* [2003], *The Unwanted Woman* [2005] and *Ceasefire* [2006].

On August 26, 2001, Milani was arrested and jailed by Iran's Islamic judiciary, a few weeks after the release of *The Hidden Half*. While the film had been previously approved by the government she was arrested and accused of "abusing arts as a tool for actions which will suit the taste of the counterrevolutionary and mohareb [those who fight god] grouplets".

Milani was held incommunicado for a week and threatened with the death penalty. She was eventually freed, following mass protests in Iran and internationally, and the charges were eventually dropped. (See "Iranian filmmaker faces death penalty in upcoming trial")

The Hidden Half is a love story and begins sometime in the early 1990s. Fereshteh (Niki Karimi), the movie's central protagonist and a former left-wing radical, is married to a Tehran judge. She decides to tell him about a love affair she had with an older man during her student years. Using a series of lengthy flashbacks, the movie not only portrays the political radicalisation of young people during the 1979 revolution that overthrew the US-puppet regime of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi but also dramatises the repression unleashed against university students by the incoming fundamentalist Islamic regime.

Milani's arrest reflects the acute sensitivity of the ruling Islamic government to any serious discussion on events following the fall of the Shah. Confronted with a continuing mass movement that threatened to take an anti-capitalist direction, Ayatollah Khomeini and his regime systematically suppressed liberal and left-wing parties and newspapers, crushed militant strike action and occupations by the working class and closed the universities. Right-wing Islamic fundamentalists aligned with the regime killed hundreds of their political opponents during this period.

Milani spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about *The Hidden Half* and the conditions facing filmmakers in Iran following a screening of the movie in Sydney.

Richard Phillips: Many of our readers will not know your work so could you provide some background on your filmmaking career?

Tahmineh Milani: I was born in September 1960, in the Azerbaijani part of Iran, and studied architecture. Right now I am working as an architect with my husband Mohammad Nikbin, who is also an architect and studied in Minnesota in the United States.

I always loved movies but did not start in film until a year after the 1979 revolution when all the universities were shut down. I did all sorts of behind-the-scenes work, including set design, and was known as a really hard worker. After a year I became a first-assistent director and after seven years was able to start making my own movies. Since then I've

made nine features and my tenth film is a short children's movie for UNICEF.

My films are mainly about the economic, social and psychological problems facing Iranian women, in particular middle-class women.

Several of my films have won international prizes and some have been box office hits in Iran. *Ceasefire*, my latest, which I wrote with Lucia Capacchione, an American psychologist, is the largest grossing film in Iranian history. It's a comic movie about personal relationship problems.

Of course, you know about *The Hidden Half*. This was an important work because it was the first film in Iran that was a little bit political and because it was about my country after the revolution.

RP: Why is it difficult for Iranian filmmakers to deal with this subject?

TM: Political movies about my country are dangerous because you never know what's going to happen. Firstly, you don't know whether the government will give you permission to go ahead and then if they do, whether it will be released or not. So it's difficult and a risk that many Iranian filmmakers don't want to take.

With *The Hidden Half*, I understood that it could lead to my arrest and imprisonment but I was an established director and felt it was my duty to make this film. I had to do it for all those who had been exiled or killed. Of course, I couldn't have made this movie without the help of my husband [Mohammad Nikbin]. He is in the movie and is my producer but he is also my closest friend and I love him very much. We always work together.

RP: Have you made any other movies exploring these years? Why is the government so nervous about this period?

TM: I've always wanted to make another film about this time and there are some brief references to this period in my movie *Two Women*. I tried to show in that film that when the government closed down the universities a lot of young women were forced into marriage by their families and their future changed.

Young students, irrespective of where they live, always protest against governments. This is normal. But the Iranian government thought that if they could shut down our universities for a while they would be able to control everything. At first we were told that the universities would be closed for six months but it ended up being for four years.

No Iranian government, especially some of those who are in power right now, wants to talk about that period because they are afraid that it will reveal a lot of bad things.

RP: What happened to the Iranian film industry during this time?

TM: It was amazing. After the revolution, maybe for six or seven years, I don't remember exactly, there were no women in Iranian movies, just men. There were a lot of really bad films made at this time. Nor did we have any American, Italian or Indian movies, just Iranian films. Eventually the authorities changed this because nobody was coming to the cinema.

It was a very strange period in our cinema history but new directors came along, like Mr Kiarostami, who is a genius, and he started making

movies about children. His film *Where Is the Friend's Home?* is a wonderful work. He had found a way to make good movies and he encouraged others.

RP: Could you explain why you were jailed for *The Hidden Half*?

TM: It was the first time an Iranian director had been jailed in my country but I don't think I was arrested because the movie was so critical of the government. They were afraid that my film would encourage other directors and that there would be more movies—better and even deeper than mine—about this period. So the government arrested me to send a message to others—don't make these sorts of films. Since then nobody has made a film about this subject.

RP: What do you think about this?

TM: I don't like it, but Iranian filmmakers have found other ways to speak to people about a lot of social issues and this has worked. For example, my movie *The Fifth Reaction* is about the relationship between a father-in-law and his son's bride. When a woman's husband dies in Iran all the property and the children come under the control of the father-in-law. This is a very political subject and my film asks many questions. Other directors have also found different ways to make comments about the situation in Iran and they do a good job.

RP: This sounds like Deepa Mehta's film *Water*, about the situation facing Indian widows.

TM: Yes, I saw that film and it's a similar question. I should also say that even though we have a lot of bad laws that give men the right to do all sorts of things, most Iranian men don't use these laws and it's possible to find a way to protest.

My film *The Unwanted Woman* is about a woman who is married with children but who has an unfaithful husband. In Iran husbands can have mistresses and that's OK, but if a married woman has a lover it is illegal and she is severely punished. My movie asks why and, in fact, all my films ask these sorts of questions.

RP: Have any of your other films been banned?

TM: Yes. My movie *Kakadu*, which was about the environment, was banned and still cannot be seen in Iran because it had a beautiful eight-year old girl in it who wasn't wearing a scarf. *Two Women* was banned for seven months and before I could even start on it my script was banned for seven years. It was eventually released and was a box office hit in Iran and popular in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

RP: What happened when you were arrested and jailed?

TM: My husband had taken my young daughter Gina to his work and I was alone in our home when suddenly five men arrived and told me that they had a letter for me about my film. My husband came home but they searched everything in my house and took a lot of things—my scripts, books, videos and other material. Many things were broken. All of this was without warning and then they took me to prison and my husband was not able to locate where I was for three days.

I had no lawyer and the jailers kept saying that the authorities were going to kill me. Every day I was questioned for many hours and didn't sleep for seven days. Look at me, I have big eyes, but after seven days you could barely see my eyes, the lids were so closed up.

The revolutionary courts in Tehran were far from the prison. Everyday I would be woken at six o'clock and transported to the court, questioned for up to seven hours and then moved back to the prison. It was a really bad time.

RP: And the campaign to secure your release?

TM: This was very important. Many Iranian artists and filmmakers protested. They warned the government that unless they released me they would continue protesting in the middle of Tehran. It was a fantastic response. Eventually President Khatami and Minister of Culture Masjed-Jamei were able to have me freed. Mr Masjed-Jamei is not an artist or intellectual but he was concerned and he appealed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, who then ordered my release. We have

never been compensated, however, for the damage to our home and belongings.

A judge also ruled that I couldn't leave the country. I'd just been given a best movie prize at the Los Angeles film festival and there were many comments made at the closing ceremony about my treatment by the Iranian government. This was an embarrassment to the government and so eventually they let me travel outside Iran. All this happened in August 2001, about 16 days before the 9/11 attacks on America.

RP: This brings me to last question. Since then the Bush administration has invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and unleashed a fear campaign against Iran. Could you comment?

TM: I'm an artist and intellectual and don't generally comment on this but what the American government says about Iran is not true. Peaceful nuclear energy is the right of the Iranian people and every person in the world so when Mr Bush and his group start talking about my country wanting nuclear weapons it is ridiculous. In any case when they talk about nuclear weapons, the big question is why they allow some countries to have these weapons but not others. These are double standards. It seems to me that Bush and his people have a lot of problems inside themselves and I don't think they really know what they're doing or where it will end up.

When the US and the UK invaded Iraq they almost destroyed everything and today in Iraq there are more than 100 people being killed everyday. The big question is for what.

RP: For oil.

TM: Yes and I'm really worried about this situation. My concern is not for countries but for people. The question is not whether you are African, Australian, Lebanese, Palestinian or whatever—but that you're a human being.

I was very sad when these wars began because the US and their allies were just killing people for money and oil. Innocent people were dying and we've now seen that again on television with the Israeli attack on Lebanon. This makes me very nervous and sad.

RP: Can you comment on the impact of your films in changing the cultural and political atmosphere in Iran?

TM: For me the best way to change things is by challenging things and provoking discussion. People have to talk. When Mr Khatami called for "dialogue among civilisations" [in 2000] I sent him a letter and suggested that what was really necessary was dialogue within society—between husband and wife, sister and brother, between neighbours.

If that happens then it will bring changes. So when I make a movie my aim is to challenge society. Some people don't like this and disagree but the most important thing is to talk and be able to publicly debate these issues. This will help people to think more deeply about issues that they face.



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