



Spotlight on Iran



December 4, 2012—Azar 14, 1391

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If there is no cinema, let them watch TV: Iran's film industry between political persecution and economic crisis

A bitter dispute between filmmakers and radical circles in the conservative camp over film director Fereydoun Jirani's new movie *I'm a Mother* is yet another indication of the difficulties that confront the Iranian film industry, which is facing political persecution as well as an escalating economic crisis.

Banned for two years by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the movie opened in theaters in late November after some changes requested by the ministry were made. The release of the movie was strongly opposed by radical circles in the conservative camp, which claimed that it portrays a lifestyle contradictory to Islam and encourages immoral behavior. On Saturday, December 1, activists belonging to the radical group Ansar-o Hezbollah held a protest rally outside the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in Tehran. They were met with a counter-rally of filmmakers and supporters of the movie, who expressed their support for its release.

Amidst the increasing criticism which the movie has come under, its director and the chairman of the Cinema Organization in the Islamic Guidance Ministry were summoned to appear before Tehran's prosecutor-general. The controversy surrounding *I'm a Mother* is yet another manifestation of the regime's desire to create pro-government cinema, which has led to strong clashes between the government and filmmakers in recent years. The argument over the movie comes in the midst of an economic crisis that threatens the Iranian film industry. The heads of the Association of Movie Theater Managers have recently threatened that they will shut down movie theaters if they do not receive government aid. In response, the minister of Islamic guidance said that he is not concerned about such threats, and that there are other alternatives to cinema, such as TV shows and movies for home viewing.

A bitter dispute between filmmakers and radical circles in the conservative camp over film director Fereydoun Jirani's new movie *I'm a Mother* is yet another indication of the difficulties that confront the Iranian film industry, which is facing political persecution as well as an escalating economic crisis.

The movie *I'm a Mother* (من مادر هستم) was made by Jirani in 2010. It follows the story of a young woman from a middle-class family who is raped just before her wedding by her father's good friend and unintentionally kills him. After his death, the widow asks the court to impose a death sentence on the young woman as a way of getting revenge on the young woman's father, who chose to marry another woman when the two of them were young. The movie was banned for two years by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, but has been recently approved for screening after some changes requested by the ministry were made.

The release of the movie in late November was strongly opposed by radical circles in the conservative camp, particularly the military Islamic group Ansar-o Hezbollah. According to its critics, the movie is corrupted, portraying a lifestyle that is contradictory to Islam and encouraging immoral behavior, such as drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and cheating on one's spouse. The opponents of the movie also say that it takes a critical stance towards the punishment of Qisas ("eye for an eye") that is common in Islam and provides a false portrayal of the Iranian justice system.

Shortly before the movie opened in theaters, the Ansar-o Hezbollah organization issued a strongly-worded memorandum of opinion demanding that the Ministry of Islamic Guidance cancel its release. The group leaders, who were able to have two movies pulled from theaters this year on grounds of immorality, announced that they intend to hold a protest rally in front of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance if their demands were not met. On Saturday, December 1, the group's activists gathered in front of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in Tehran with signs condemning the movie, demanding that it be pulled from theaters and calling for the dismissal of the ministry officials who approved its release. The activists chanted slogans against what they referred to as "anti-Islamic" cinema and demanded to shut it down. The Ansar-o Hezbollah activists were met with a counter-rally of filmmakers and supporters of the movie, who expressed their support for its release. A shouting match ensued between the two groups.



Opponents of *I'm a Mother* demonstrating outside the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, December 1

The demonstration of the Ansar-o Hezbollah activists provoked a major dispute between the movie's opponents and supporters. The radical activists were joined by a number of Majles members and clerics affiliated with the right wing of the conservative camp. Several members of the Majles Culture Committee attacked the movie, claiming that it does not serve the interests of the regime, the Islamic revolution, and the Iranian cinema. One of the committee members even threatened that he will take action to impeach Mohammad Hosseini, the minister of Islamic guidance.

Conservative Majles member Hamid Rasa'i, member of the Film Council that works under the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and has the power to approve or disqualify movies, said that the filmmakers did not introduce all the changes demanded by the council. In a TV show on cinema aired last week, Rasa'i argued that the film portrays two families that do not practice a religious lifestyle, and three mothers none of whom behaves like a mother should. He said that one of the demands of the council after watching the movie was to change its name from *I'm a Mother* to *I'm Not a Mother* (<http://rasaee.ir/Interview.php?ID=1417>, December 1).

The criticism was taken up by Seyyed Mehdi Khamoushi, head of the Islamic Publicity Organization, who argued that movies like *I'm a Mother* are the result of lack of oversight by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. According to Khamoushi, the Iranian cinema has to create movies that encourage and propagate religious faith (Mehr, December 2).

On the other hand, the movie's supporters said that the intent of the filmmakers was to warn about the Western lifestyle and its consequences. They accused the movie's critics that their opposition is due to political motives rather than considerations that are relevant to the matter at hand, and that many of them have not even seen the movie. Several websites affiliated with the moderate wing of the conservative bloc criticized Ansar-o Hezbollah and stepped up in defense of the movie and its creators. The Khabar On-line website said that *I'm a Mother* provides a critical look at negative social phenomena, including the desire for revenge, infidelity that destroys families, and alcohol consumption that leads to crime. An article published by the website said that a movie that comes out against negative social phenomena has to portray some of them, which is not the same as portraying the whole society as being corrupt or challenging its morality (Khabar On-line, November 30).

The Baztab website, too, said that the movie takes a stab at the bourgeoisie and its lifestyle, and should not be viewed as encouraging corruption. The website accused the movie's opponents of acting on ignorance, and wondered how is that they oppose the release of the movie when there are many American and European movies shown in Iran that deal with corruption in the police and among the leadership. It's impossible to ignore the divorce figures in Iran or police figures on the number of alcoholics in Iranian society, Baztab said, just as it is impossible to ignore the moral problems of society when even the Supreme Leader discusses them in the open and demands solutions to make the situation better. What the movie portrays is not even one percent of what is happening in Iranian society, and the situation will become even worse if the negative social phenomena are not depicted in movies and in the media on grounds that such depiction may encourage them. If the opponents of the movie are in fact religiously concerned, they better demonstrate in front of the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Central Bank, which are to blame for the dire economic situation (Baztab, December 1).



Supporters of *I'm a Mother* demonstrating outside the Ministry of Islamic Guidance (December 1)

In another article published on the website, Baztab strongly criticized the activity of Ansar-o Hezbollah, saying that the group's concern for the moral situation of the cinema and the society takes second place to its interest in pursuing political interests. The website took issue with the fact that while *I'm a Mother* has been approved for release by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, such prominent Iranian filmmakers as Ebrahim Hatamikia, Majid Majidi, and Kamal Tabrizi are not allowed to make movies in Iran and are accused of secularism and opposition to the regime. The critics of the movie better focus less on the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes in the movie and more on how much alcohol is consumed in Tehran's hotels and cafés, Baztab said (December 2).

Amidst the increasing criticism that the movie has come under, the Iranian media reported earlier this week that Fereydoun Jirani, the film's director, and Javad Shamaqdari, chairman of the Cinema Organization in the Islamic Guidance Ministry, were summoned to appear before Tehran's prosecutor-general (Mehr, December 2). The controversy surrounding *I'm a Mother* is yet another manifestation of the regime's desire to create pro-government cinema, which has led to strong clashes between the government and filmmakers in recent years. Last year the Iranian authorities decided to close down the House of Cinema, the main trade union for those employed in the local film industry. The minister of Islamic guidance blamed the decision on the conduct of the union leaders, saying that they acted in a manner incompatible with the values of the Islamic revolution. As an example of such conduct, he mentioned a statement released by the union in September 2011 in support of several documentary filmmakers detained by the authorities on charges of collaborating with the BBC. The

minister also said that regime opponents who reside abroad and have made statements against the regime had been invited to the annual celebrations organized by the House of Cinema.

The escalating argument surrounding the movie comes in the midst of an economic crisis that threatens the Iranian film industry. Mohammad-Reza Saberi, the spokesman of the Association of Movie Theater Managers, has warned recently that movie theaters will be forced to cancel their showings if they do not receive government aid. In a letter sent about two weeks ago by the association to top officials in the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the association leaders threatened to shut down movie theaters unless government aid was forthcoming.



The reformist website Kalemeh reported last week that, due to the escalating economic crisis, there has been a considerable decrease in the number of movie-goers in Iran, which has put the film industry on the brink of bankruptcy. In a derogatory response to the threats made by the Association of Movie Theater Managers to shut them down due to the economic situation, the minister of Islamic guidance said that he is not concerned about such threats, and that there are other alternatives to cinema, such as TV shows and movies for home viewing (Kalemeh, December 29).