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Is this Iran? Depiction of the 2009 Iranian post-election protests in mass media and in the webcomic **Zahra's Paradise**[1]

Barbara Uhlig

Abstract

On 19th February 2010 the first episode of the webcomic *Zahra's Paradise* was posted on-line. Only eight months had passed since the violent post-election riots in Iran had erupted. Using eyewitness reports, videos, photos, blog entries, and similar sources, the authors created a fictional story that was deeply rooted in reality and that was familiar to many in Iran.

Considering the importance of visual representation of state brutality, since more credibility is placed in visual than oral testimony (Mirzoeff 2006), this webcomic played an important part in divulging the protests at a global level and made the politically sanctioned torture "incontestably real" (Scarry 1985). This essay will explore how the documentation of the events and their presentation in the mass media have been reflected in this webcomic and discuss the significance of social media and the Internet in the development of the post-election protests.

Keywords: web comic, Iran, election protests, violence, resistance.

1 UHLIG, Barbara. 2014. "Is this Iran? Depiction of the 2009 Iranian post-election protests in mass media and in the webcomic *Zahra's Paradise*." Special Issue: *Insecurity and Global Terror(s)*, *estrema: Interdisciplinary Review for the Humanities* 5 (Fall). www.estrema-cec.com.

1. Introduction

On 13th June 2009 reports on the landslide victory of Ahmadinejad and the resulting spontaneous mass demonstrations dominated western news media. Even though foreign journalists had been advised by the authorities not to leave their offices, images of protesters clashing with the Iranian police and the Basij militia spread quickly, causing public outcry and worldwide dismay.

Post-election riots in Iran were highly mediatized in international press from the outset, particularly once the overall peaceful demonstrations turned into bloody combat. After the government had expelled all foreign journalists in an attempt to control the media representation of the riots, reports on the upheaval were known out of Iran by being posted to the Internet. Due to the increasing availability of camera phones, practically everyone in Iran was able to take photos and videos of the clashes and to upload them to the Internet. The protests thus reached the global stage in the form of shaky YouTube videos and 140-character messages on the social platform Twitter. The extent to which social media helped to sustain the Iranian post-election protests and the consequences of this form of eyewitness account will be analyzed in the second part of this essay.

The webcomic *Zahra's Paradise* was a direct reaction to the riots and to the non-offical medium through which they were divulged in citizen journalism and material circulated over the Internet. Starting in February 2010 it was created for and published on the Internet using blogs, videos, tweets, and phone calls with friends and family in Iran as sources for the narration.

Unsurprisingly the website for *Zahra's Paradise* was blocked in Iran. The printed version that came out in 2011 has been forbidden too. The story denounces violations of fundamental freedoms and human rights, state brutality, corruption, and various forms of torture at Iranian prisons. As Elaine Scarry pointed out in her book *The Body in Pain* (1985), torture destroys the ability to communicate the experienced horror because pain "destroy[s] the capacity for speech" (54). *Zahra's Paradise* gives a voice to the victims by visually representing the torture and the inhuman brutality of the Iranian regime. But it also reveals another side to Iran that is rarely seen in Western media: that of a rich culture, of warmth and hospitality and a people that help each other without prejudice and that fight oppression in unconventional ways. *Zahra's Paradise* is thus a personal

and ultimately human story that tries to paint a different picture of Iran's citizens and to raise international support for the Iranian fight for freedom.

2. The 2009 Presidential Elections in Iran – a Brief History

In early 2009 Iranians seemed to have little hope to be able to prevent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from being re-elected as Iranian president with the strong support of the Supreme leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei. However, in the weeks leading up to the election, Ahmadinejad loosened restrictions, allowed international media to cover the election process and participated in a televised presidential debate (Tait 2009) in an unprecedented act in Iranian history. Adding to this the use of social media platforms for campaigning turned the Iranian elections of 2009 into a highly mediatized event. The state media took this as a sign of its transparency and democratic structure, while the opposition saw it as a chance to voice the government's failure and act against repression. Increasingly harsh criticism of Ahmadinejad's politics raised hopes that change was possible after all. Political mass demonstrations – mainly organized by his opponent Mousavi and his supporters – were frequent and well attended. With reform seemingly within reach, the eventual election results were a harsh awakening.

The elections were on Friday 12th June 2009. Polling stations normally close around 8 pm but many stations were kept open until around midnight due to the large number of people that still wanted to vote.[2] From early on it was clear that much more people were going to vote than in the preceding elections when not voting was seen as a form of protest.[3] At 7 am the next morning, only a few hours after the polling stations closed, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner of the election. According to official statements he received 62,5 percent of the votes while his opponent Mir-Hossein Mousavi received only 33,75 percent).[4] This announcement provoked an outcry of disbelief – Mousavi and his supporters claimed election fraud. There are indeed signs that raise suspicion: firstly, it was practically impossible for all votes to be counted in such a short time. In Iran the counting is done manually in a very time-consuming process. Moreover, the

2 "Präsidentschaftswahl – Iran Wartet Gespannt Auf Das Wahlergebnis," *Die Zeit*, December 6, sec. Ausland, 2009, http://www.zeit.de/online/2009/25/iran-praesidentenwahl-beginn.

3 Official statistics assume that 85 percent of the Iranians went to the polls, compared to an average 60 to 65 percent in preceding elections (Ghazian 2012, 2). It is, however, questionable how reliable official figures are.

4 "Ahmadinejad Wins Iran Presidential Election," *BBC*, June 13, sec. Middle East, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8098305.stm.

Election Commission is required to wait three days before being allowed to certify the results which again have to be recognized by the supreme leader (Rahimi 2013, 85f). But in 2009 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei congratulated the President on the day after the election, thus confirming the results while at the same time fueling rumors of a stolen election.[5] Secondly, Ahmadinejad had to increase his popularity in 600 to 700 percent among ethnic minorities in the provinces (Trachsler 2009, 2). Just days after the election an analysis of the voting figures demonstrated that there was no basis for the presumed change of voter orientation. News agencies further reported that the text messaging system[6] as well as web-based social media platforms (Trachsler 2009, 2) had been blocked since the day prior to the elections.[7] The ministry of communication spoke of technical problems, though it was more likely an attempt to hinder the opposition which used both mediums to organize themselves. Finally, pre-election polls carried out after the important presidential debate of June 3 predicted a close result between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi.[8] The reformers urged the public on posters to go to the polling stations as a high voter turnout might prevent a second term for Ahmadinejad (Dareini 2009). With close to 40 million votes cast, the landslide victory for Ahmadinejad took many by surprise. So a crowd estimated at several million people (Kavanaugh et al. 2011, 3) wrapped themselves in the color green – the color of the opposition candidate Mousavi – and took to the streets to demand re-elections. These were to be the largest protests since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In fact, these were the first election-related violent protests in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran.[9] Even before the elections, the Revolutionary Guards had declared to crush every effort at a "velvet revolution" ("Iran's Guards" 2009; Evans and Dahl 2009). After the elections they did not hesitate to put their rhetoric into practice. There were brutal clashes, particularly between protesters and the so-called basiji, often described as a

5 For a detailed analysis of the role rumors had in the 2009 election and the subsequent protests, see Babak Rahimi, "Politics of Informal Communication: Conspiracy Theories, Gossips and Rumors in (post-) Election 2009 Iran," in *Rumor and Communication in Asia in the Internet Age*, edited by Greg Delziel (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 78–93.

6 "Iran 'Lifts Block on SMS Texting,'" *BBC*, July 2, sec. Middle East, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8131095.stm.

7 Facebook has been blocked repeatedly even weeks before the election, presumably to keep Mousavi from using it for his campaign .See "Facebook in Iran Blocked ahead of Presidential Elections," Novinite.com, May 25, 2009, http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=103914.

8 It is questionable how reliable how reliable Iranian pre-election polls were. Most of them were highly variable and thus not useful. For an insightful analysis of the last three polls from Tehran (Wang 2009).

9 "There has not been a history of election-related violence in Iran, either on election day or at other times" (Addis and Katzman 2009, 5).

voluntary paramilitary militia. They are also often referred to as "plainclothes": since they are not part of the police, they are not required to wear uniforms.[10] In its 2010 report Amnesty International stated that the riots and their violent suppression resulted in the detention of more than 5,000 people, many of whom were tortured and some died from their injuries while in custody (Hendelman-Baavur 2008),[11] not counting those injured or killed in the streets. On Internet platforms such as YouTube or Facebook, hundreds of videos showed the basiji severely beating people with batons and metal rods, using tear gas and even shooting people. Often, they would attack protesters on their way back home, when they were easy targets.

3. The Role of Social Media and the Internet during the Post-Election Protests

One of the most well known victims of the 2009 post-election demonstrations was Neda Agha-Soltan a 26-year-old student who was on her way home when she was shot in the chest by a basiji on 20th June. Her death was captured on cell phones and went viral after the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho put it up on his website. It quickly turned her into a symbol of the Iranian protests, both within Iran and internationally, further fuelling the riots. Another important death of a protester was that of Sohrab Arabi who was either also shot during the protests or tortured to death at Evin prison – official government statements vary. The true circumstances of this death remain unknown until this day. His tragic fate and that of his mother inspired "Zahra's Paradise." This webcomic chronicles a mother's search for her vanished son, a regime's abuse of power and a people's fight for freedom and justice. In the case of Iran and *Zahra's Paradise,* these examples show that the Internet played a central role in the turn of events.

Evidence of what was happening in Iran was mainly circulated over the Internet, particularly after most foreign journalists had been expelled once the mass protests broke out and Iranian reports were denied a platform. All seven TV stations within Iran are state-controlled. Newspapers that advocate liberation or criticize the regime are normally shut down within short time. Blogs voicing resistance to the government get blocked. In 2009, with crackdowns on all means of communication such as Facebook, YouTube, Gmail, Yahoo messenger or text messages, it was Twitter that proved to be

10 There are many videos still on-line that document how the Basiji run people over on their motorcycles intentionally or beat them up with metal rods.

11 See also "Iran - Amnesty International Report 2010," Amnesty International, 2013, accessed July 25, https://www.amnesty.org/en/region/iran/report-2010.

the most reliable way of spreading photos and organizing protest. This was mostly due to the fact that Twitter is based on open sharing and therefore more difficult to control than other platforms. Users can also tweet over the Internet as well as by SMS. This means that even when cell phone use is restricted – as it was in Iran when bandwidth on cell phone towers was limited (Kavanaugh et al. 2011, 8) – tweets are more likely to get through the block than Facebook messages or emails.[12] Surprisingly, even though the riots of 2009 are often referred to as "twitter revolution," there seem to have been less than 100 estimated users twittering on the protests from within Iran (Kavanaugh et al. 2011, 8). What appeared to be a flood of messages tweeted by protesting Iranians were to a large majority re-tweets created by users outside of Iran. However, social media tools were critical in spreading videos of state brutality, mass demonstrations and information on missing protesters as well as raising awareness on an international level. Still, while Twitter undoubtedly played an important role, it was certainly not the only way for protesters to organize themselves. On the one hand, social media platforms "allowed organizers to break the information blockade that the Iranian regime had implemented after the foreign journalists were kicked out" (Nadar Hashemi *apud* Tusa 2013, 2). On the other hand, the riots needed a strong local political organization as well as person-to-person communication networks in order to help verify the information posted on-line. This is particularly crucial in a country where Internet or even phone access can be as unreliable, as in Iran. Furthermore, since just about anyone can post material on-line, the authorship of videos and messages is mostly unclear. Since technology can be used by supporters of the regime, it became pressing to confirm the unreliable truth-value of the information and stories which were circulating on-line. Hence, authorship and authenticity of on-line information are contested, making it susceptible to manipulation. Even videos are not reliable and "[f]ake clips, usually made to provoke and split the opposition, are becoming a staple of the Iranian Internet," as Evgeny Morozov pointed out (2009). In this context, the video of Neda Agha Soltan's death reveals yet another facet inherent to all images of conflict, which is its undetermined nature between documentary truthfulness and medial manipulation, which raises questions about its neutrality. The Iranian post-election protests were a highly visual conflict, relying heavily on the circulation of images – both by the protesters that

12 In early 2012, Twitter announced on its blog that they had teamed up with the two largest satellite operators to ensure users could tweet even in situations when Internet and phone lines were not accessible. Twitter Blog, "Twitter SMS: Now Available for Satellite Providers," February 9, 2012. https://blog.twitter.com/2012/twitter-sms-now-available-satellite-providers.

used these images to testify the state violence and by the government that wanted to discredit the images of the protesters and spread their own propaganda material. Therefore, images cannot be understood without their "semiotic, cultural, historical, political, or material context" (George and Shoos 2005, 589). The video of Neda's death does not show the circumstances of her death nor does it capture the person shooting her. Without contextualization, all the spectator sees is a woman who suddenly breaks down, blood gushing out of her chest (fig. 1). When the video was uploaded on 20th June, rumors spread just as quickly as the video itself, some heroizing her death, others claiming it was fake and created to stir the riots against Ahmadinejad. The government took advantage of this by creating several false stories, all of them denouncing Neda Agha Soltan. They were intended to prevent her of becoming a martyr of the Green Movement.[13] Journalists all around the world investigated the story and tried to find witnesses or friends who could testify and reveal the true story.[14] This demonstrates that the image itself does not have an autonomous truthfulness and needs to be decoded and contextualized in order to be understood.

4. The Webcomic "Zahra's Paradise"

Zahra's Paradise entered the virtual battlefield that the Internet had become in the weeks after the election. Its title refers to the largest cemetery in Tehran, beheshte-e-Zahra, where many martyrs of the Islamic Revolution but also many of the protesters from the 2009 riots are buried. It does, however, also stand for the Iranian-Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi who in 2003 wanted to take photos of the women outside Evin prison who were waiting for news of their relatives that had went missing in the wake of the 2003 protests. Instead, she was arrested and tortured to death, becoming one of the many victims of state brutality who died fighting for freedom and civil rights in Iran.

The webcomic was created by the exile-Iranian Amir and the Paris-born Algerian artist Khalil. Though they both live in the United States now, they have never lost contact to friends and family in Iran. The story they tell is ultimately personal, inspired by many phone calls, YouTube videos, blogs and pictures. Published in installments of one page every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, it tells the story of a young protester,

13 The most bizarre version said that Neda had acted out her death to discredit the government by having her faked assassination captured on cell phone but that in the ambulance she was killed for real by the British secret service (Rahimi 2013, 89).

14 This produced documentary's like HBO's "For Neda" or BBC's "Neda: An Iranian Martyr."

Mehdi, who disappeared from a hospital after being wounded in the riots of June 16. His mother and his older brother Hassan search for him everywhere, at the hospitals, the morgue, Evin prison. The framing story, structured has a road-movie, consists of their quest and highlights the encounters with other people along the way. There is a copy-shop owner who secretly produces copies of books that are forbidden by the Iranian government – he calls it the People's Press. There are the so-called "grieving mothers," a group of women who meet in Tehran's parks to publicly remind of their children who were killed or disappeared during the demonstrations. The mothers of Neda Agha-Soltan and Sohrab Arabi are also part of this group which faces continued harassment from the Iranian government for demanding the prosecution of those responsible for their children's death. In December 2009, for example, 33 members were arrested, 14 of whom have been transferred to Evin Prison.[15] In the comic, Hassan and his mother meet people who fell from grace when the old system of the Shah was overthrown and who risk everything they have left to help find the missing son. Hassan writes down their stories in his blog, thus highlighting the importance of blogs for documenting the events in Iran that are now re-blogged within the story and in "real life" as a webcomic.

As mentioned before, the main storyline was inspired by the fate of an Iranian mother, Parvin Fahimi, who lost her son Sohrab Arabi during the riots. Until today, it is not quite clear how he died. His mother had been told that he was detained in Evin prison, though after 26 days of searching for him at the hospitals, the Revolutionary tribunals, and the police station, she finally found him in a state morgue. There she was told that he was accidentally shot in the heart the day he vanished, implying that he had never been to Evin. Still, the rumor persists that he had been tortured to death in prison. Chapter Two of the webcomic, titled "Evin," recounts how she showed a prison guard a picture of her son, asking if he had seen him. It takes its direct inspiration from a video of Pavin Fahimi outside Evin. The large, black-bearded man depicted in the webcomic is practically identical to the man in the video which shows the mother talking to a prison guard.[16] This demonstrates that the webcomic evolves mostly around real events and real people, trying to contextualize them and thus give meaning to the fragmented

15 Payvand. "Grieving Mothers Arrested in Tehran." Payvand Iran News. December 6, 2009. http://www.payvand.com/news/09/dec/1060.html; Sign4Change. "Mourning Mothers Arrested in Laleh Park, Tehran." Change for Equality. January 11, 2010. http://www.sign4change.info/english/spip.php?article631.

16 The video can still be found on-line*: Evin prison Tehran. Mother of killed student, Sohrab Arabi, 19 years old!,* YouTube video, accessed September 13, 2013. http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=IFLsevzYnQo

snapshots that leave Iran in the form of short videos and photo stills. By embedding those snapshots into a narrative, they give the nameless protesters a face and make it a personal and engaging story.

5. Images of Terror

The images of the 2009 protests were very much "unlike the prevailing images that have represented Iran in the mainstream press over the past three decades" (Alexanian 2011, 425). The photos and videos were necessary to draw international attention to the political dissension of the Iranian and the brutality of the repressive regime. As Nicholas Mirzoeff pointed out, "visual evidence is still the most convincing and powerful form," (2006, 24) whereas eyewitness accounts are often met with little response. However, many events that happened during the post-election protests would have needed visual documentary but remain invisible due to the lack of images. Systematic torture in Iranian prisons is one of these invisible areas of state abuse. Although human rights organizations such as Amnesty International have for years reported on the abuses and deaths in Iranian prison, which occurred as a result of torture, they were widely disregarded. Challenging the state-controlled line between seeing and not being allowed to see can be life threatening in Iran. The webcomic deals with this explicitly by referencing Zahra Kazemi and the circumstances of her death. By photographing the women waiting outside Evin prison for news of their relatives, Kazemi claimed the right to see what she was not supposed to see. This appeared to be a menace strong enough to the regime to detain her and turn her invisible. Although her family demanded her body to be sent to Canada Kazemi was buried by the state in Iran. This ensured that no autopsy could take place and the circumstances of her death could stay hidden and therefore speculative. The webcomic continues Kazemi's effort to turn the invisible crimes of the state authorities into incontestable and visible evidence. The authors achieve this by calling into question the official cause of death and by shifting the means of representation from the photographs to the photographer's body. As one of the character states: "What she couldn't expose on film … her body revealed in death" (Khalil and Amir 2011, 44). These images in the webcomic are in the first place intended for a western audience which needs the confirmation of visual images – even if drawn – to give force to the human rights violations of the Iranian government. Within Iran, visual evidence of systematic torture in Iranian prisons was not necessary as its use

was widely known and acknowledged (Oates 2013). Again, Amir and Khalil use reports of a true event as source for their fictional translation of the state's invisible torture into images. Their report on a young protester who was raped by the interrogators is probably based on the fate of Ebrahim Sharifi.[17] Like the young man in "Zahra's Paradise," Sharifi has not recovered from his experience at prison and tried to commit suicide several times since his release.

As has been mentioned before, another important aspect is that the image's meaning changes considerably if its context changes. Therefore, "certain uses of the images will deflect rather than illuminate the politics of an event" (George and Shoos 2005, 589). A public execution, for example, is meant to show that justice has been done but also to "dismiss all question of innocence or even right to a trial" (598). The execution is used to turn those sentenced to death into a threat to the Islamic society, like a tumor that needs to be cut out before it can spread. *Zahra's Paradise* turns the table. It condemns the human rights violations and denies that justice had been served in any way. Instead, it reclaims the executed Iranians by juxtaposing them with the war martyrs of the Republic of Iran. The authors hereby suggest that the executed are in fact the real martyrs. Turning the oral testimonies of torture and execution into images, the webcomic provides the reader with the "only way of seeing what happens when the state kills" (Austin Sarat *apud* George and Shoos 2005, 600). On the first pages, the webcomic already sets the themes of excessive violence against the weaker ones, of the suspension of rights in the name of religion and of a system turning against its own people. It starts with a prologue which takes place on a farm in Evin – a place notorious for its prison and particularly its political prisoners' wing. From afar, the chants of "Allahu Akbar" – "God is the Greatest," a battlefield cry used in the 1979 revolution as well as in the riots of 2009 – can be heard, place and time already linking the prologue to the protests. At the crack of dawn, a farmer leaves his house with a shovel on his shoulder. What could be an idyllic scene immediately turns gruesome: the shovel glistens in the morning sun like a weapon, the farmer rams it forcefully into the ground and instead of digging the soil he digs a grave, so big it could fit a human body. Then he takes a sack and throws his dog's puppies in it. The mother dog tries to defend her puppies but she is too weak. In the story, the puppies are used as a metaphor for the

17 "Campaign Report on Human Rights in Iran since 12 June 2009 – Accelerating Slide into Dictatorship," International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, September 21, 2009, http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2009/09/report09/.

young protesters of the June riots – innocent, helpless, surrendered, and at the mercy of the regime and those in power. At night the puppies are yelping in their sack while their mother watches anxiously, much like the protesters' mothers are waiting for their children outside Evin prison. The next morning the farmer takes the shovel and beats the puppies to death. He then leaves the sack in the scorching heat of the sun. This is frighteningly reminiscent of a scene in Kahrizak prison where the prisoners are left in the sun, without any water, flies circling them. And still, the puppies are not dead, some are still whining – this can be seen as a metaphor to the protesters' cry for freedom which cannot be stopped. Finally the farmer drowns them in a nearby river – the stream of the revolution – where the sack is sinking towards Zahra's Paradise, as the final image indicates. Here again, the name Zahra's Paradise refers to both, the real cemetery as a metaphor for those who died for freedom and civil rights, and the webcomic which is keeping this "lost generation" (Khalil and Amir 2011, 14) alive with the help of his blog. Throughout the course of the story, the webcomic refers back to this first episode. When it tells of the injured protesters that are arrested – or kidnapped, one might say – at the hospitals, they are compared to the puppies thrown into the sack. Later, a prison guard calls them "dogs," endangering the legal and civil system, as he says to his girlfriend: "Let them loose and it'll be the end of Iran, the end of Islam" (Khalil and Amir 2011, 172, original emphasis). Dogs thus become the metaphor for the younger generation and – more generally – for anyone that demands civil rights or freedom. The old conservatives see the protesters as a threat, as something one has to get rid of (Khalil and Amir 2011, 13), even though they are one people, not enemies wishing to destroy the country. There are, however, many ways by which the system destroys its citizens. Human rights organizations have been denouncing the cruelty of the Iranian Republic for years, accusing it of torture, show trials, and the systematic persecution of minorities. *Zahra's Paradise* is tackling each of these issues by rendering the images of torture into personal and complex drawings, thus making the horrible accessible, though often hardly bearable, as an in-depth analysis of three key sequences will demonstrate.

In Chapter Five, the blogger Hassan and his mother are riding in a taxi on their way to the morgue (fig. 2). They want to see if Mehdi is among the killed. They ask the driver if he has seen Mehdi. During the post-election riots, taxi drivers turned out to be a reliable source of information as they got around the city a lot (Kavanaugh et al. 2011, 4). So they often knew where riots were supposed to take place or could look out for missing people. Suddenly there is a traffic jam because of a public execution – two boys

are to be hanged because they are gay. The panel's structure is quite expressive: the layout clearly tears the page in two, with a thick border of white space dividing the execution on the right and the three people in the taxi on the left. This highlights the clash between what is happening outside in the streets and how those in the car resent this practice. It also contrasts the long and rich culture of Iran with so-called "culture" introduced with the Cultural Revolution in 1980 – what was once a country of sophisticated poetry and scientific innovations is now noted for leading the global execution statistics. However, the two parts of the panel are not completely separated, as those in the taxi cannot escape the crane that looms over them, as a warning sign to everyone who disagrees with the government's twisted ideology. The possibility that they too might end up on the crane is always in the air. Referencing one of the most famous Iranian poets from the 13th century who had a male muse inspiring his poetry the taxi driver says: "If Rumi and Shams were alive today, I'll bet they'd hang them, too" (Khalil and Amir 2011, 85), indicating that Iran regressed from an open-minded state to one that is blind to all but its own prejudices. Then he adds another quote by a famous Iranian poet from the 14th century, Hafez: "It must be that they have no faith in the day of judgment that they so brazenly forge and foul the judge's work" (2011, 85), which is an open criticism of a country that calls itself a theocracy but is more a dictatorship led by people who like to play God themselves, as the webcomic repeatedly suggests. The executions are meant as visual evidence that homosexuality is a threat to the Islamic values and therefore a menace to the Iranian society. The authors use the page structure and the narrative context to demonize those who authorize these executions. In their story, it is the government which becomes a threat to the Iranian culture and its true traditional values. They hereby use the webcomic's narrative to stabilize the images that are circulated on-line by letting the characters comment on the events. In fig. 2, for example, Hassan's words are similar to a caption to the image of the execution: "Christians have the Crucifix, we have the Crane" (2011, 85). This is an allusion to Roman times when Christians who did not agree with the religious beliefs were crucified to intimidate others – crucifixion was a public form of execution meant to instill fear into everyone. In Iran, the crane is used as a sort of mobile gallows meant to kill those who pose a threat to an oppressive regime. This view undermines the perspective the government seeks to communicate and allows for reflective discussion on this serious political issue. It should be noted that Iran is the only country in the world where the condemned are not dropped from a certain height to break their neck

but are lifted from the ground so they suffocate slowly. After they have stopped kicking, they are left hanging for an hour or a day as a warning.

The following two pages (fig. 3) are sketched as a chessboard of 24 black and white squares. The black ones show what is taking place inside the morgue – also called "hell" in the comic – while the white ones depict the discussion of several taxi drivers outside the morgue, or in "purgatory." As in a game of chess, the action in the black and white squares is synchronized, as if it were a reaction to the opponent's moves. The taxi driver who brought them to the morgue shows a poster of Mehdi to his colleagues, saying: "They lost this kid in the demonstrations" (2011, 86). At the same time, Hassan and his mother are handed a whole binder with photographs of kids lost in the demonstration. While the taxi drivers pass around Mehdi's poster outside, each of them holding it once, Hassan and his mother turn the page to another dead protester's distorted face, all of the victims young, covered in blood, or missing teeth, all of them reduced to numbers. Their death masks betray the violent and brutal way they died. In the terror that froze on their faces in the moment of their death, they all look similar to each other. The purpose of Hassan, his mother and of all other families that come to the morgue to find their relatives while hoping not to find them in this place, is to give the dead their identity and their name back. It is also to witness the government's brutality: each of the victims' portraits in the black squares is framed by Hassan and his mother. Most of the time they are depicted looking at the pictures, sometimes they touch them, as a sign of bearing witness, of being connected to them. Just as the Alavis are searching for Mehdi, each of these men and women has a family searching frantically for them. Outside, in the white squares, the taxi drivers equate the dead to the goat used in a game of Bazkashi. That is a sort of polo played with the beheaded carcass of a goat for a ball. The metaphor functions at several levels: firstly, without a head it becomes practically impossible to identify anyone so it equates to the anonymous numbers the killed protesters are given in lieu of names. Secondly, being killed for the sake of the game is a very futile death. The protesters are thus compared to the goat that is killed to have something to play with – the rioters are a mere entertainment to those in charge. It turns the dead into pawns sacrificed in the government's sick game of power. For those kids it does not matter who wins as they are dying anyway. They fight to achieve a change of government but by doing so they are actually helping the government: Now they can further condemn western influence because of course the west is solely responsible for

the riots, they can introduce even stricter rules and give the Revolutionary Guards even more power to quell the dissent, which is a very cynical perspective.

The third and last example of the extraordinary imagery Khalil and Amir come up with is a frightening and bleak drawing that translates the madness and brutality of the Iranian judiciary system into something palpable: their depiction of the Islamic Republic's Judiciary as a "Killing Machine" (fig. 4): In the webcomic Hassan finds a girl that has an affair with one of the guards at Evin prison. She manages to install a spyware program on her lover's laptop so that Hassan can search in the prison's secret files for his brother. He had already discovered that the government bought a piece of land at Zahra's Paradise to secretly bury the ones killed in the protests, called "Lot 309." This is why all the clocks in fig. 4 show that it is 9 minutes past 3 – it suggests that a grave in Zahra's Paradise is a likely outcome of any trial in Iran. In the story he also discovers that Iran's judiciary is a cold-blooded machinery that only knows torture or death and is constructed by the country's two supreme leaders, Khomeini (on the left) and Khamenei (on the right). Its victims are brought in at the left side of the drawing, either by the police or kicked in with a baton by the basiji. It is described as a machine "where time is a measure of pain" (2011, 169), where each passing minute points to torture and death, hence the clocks' reference to the graveyard. It is a well functioning machine that knows neither mercy nor difference, reducing people to mere numbers, stripping them naked, turning them into meat that falls out of the mincer which is Khomeini's ear. It turns the words "in the name of god, the merciful, the compassionate," which are in the preamble of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and written across the middle of the drawing, into a lie. Instead, inhumanity and terror prevail. Quite interestingly, the conveyor where people are brought in by the basij leads straight to prison, without a detour via official prosecution and without ever seeing a lawyer. The police entry is not much better and the protesters are brought in like sheep to the slaughterhouse, their posture slumped over, some are sitting down, resigned. It is also a very bureaucratic system that pretends to be democratic while actually supporting the illegitimate use of power. There are four judges and one guard at the hearing, but no lawyer and no one in defense of the accused. The court ushers are swift in stamping the indictment side by side on the assembly line and then the accused are swallowed up and disappear in Khomeini's theocracy that is churning out verdicts of guilty. Alarmingly, there is no way out of this system. It either ends in prison, where Zahra's Paradise is close since the conditions in Iran's prisons are difficult, to say the least, or it ends at the

crane for ridiculous reasons as being gay, an addict, or for being a spy. Charges for espionage are quite common in Iran and normally carry the death penalty. The Iranian government did detain foreigners in the past.[18] Although careful with foreign journalists, the government particularly targets foreign journalists with an Iranian background, such as US-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi (Tran 2009). Reliable figures are impossible to obtain and the number of unreported executions is most certainly higher than the scores officially acknowledged by the authorities. Still, Iran is leading the global execution statistics – only its ally China executes more people than the Islamic Republic of Iran. It had the "[s]econd highest level of executions worldwide in 2012, most for drug related crimes" ("Death Penalty" 2012). In 2009, the execution rate increased by 20 percent, many of those convicted were protesters or political prisoners found guilty of "enmity against God." According to human rights organizations, there were "112 executions in the 8-week period following the June 12 Presidential elections" ("Execution Statistics" 2010). Amnesty International reported that many of these proceedings were legally flawed.[19] In the weeks after the violent outbreak of June 2009,[20] the number of imprisoned journalists rose dramatically. By 2013, the number had nearly doubled,[21] and it is doubtful that this trend is going to change in the near future.

6. Conclusion

Amir and Khalil chose to publish their story as a webcomic for several reasons. Firstly, they chose the comics medium because their narration needed to be visual – after all it was a very visual revolution, carried by blurry YouTube videos. But compared to making a movie, the comics production does not demand expensive equipment to create professional looking results. Also, they neither needed locations nor actors who might have been reluctant to have their face recorded in such a production. Amir and Khalil did not even put their family names on the book's cover for fear of safety. Secondly,

18 For example, the hikers Shane Bauer, Sarah Shroud and Joshua Fattal had been arrested at or near the Iranian border in 2009 and were later charged with espionage (Healy 2009). In 2013, several Slovakians on a paragliding trip have been arrested on accusation of spying, see (Sandels 2013). Iranians convicted for espionage are often members of religious minorities such as the Bahai faith (Mackey 2013).

19 "Death Sentences and Executions," Amnesty International, 2010, http://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/DeathSentencesExecutions2009.pdf.

20 "2009 Statistic of Imprisoned Journalists Worldwide," Committee to Protect Journalists, 2010, http://www.cpj.org/imprisoned/2009.php.

21 "2012 Statistic of Imprisoned Journalists Worldwide," Committee to Protect Journalists, 2013, http://www.cpj.org/imprisoned/2012.php.

they did not want too much time to pass between the riots, the creation of the comic and its publication. The comic went on-line in February 2010, 8 months after the riots, and the topic had mostly vanished from the international news already. They thought it important to keep the discussion alive, to raise awareness (Alexanian 2011; Khalil and Amir 2011, 12) and keep up both international pressure against the regime and the support of the Iranian people. But they also wanted to show the Iranians who were still living in Iran that they were not forgotten, that their stories were passed on. This is also why the comic was at first simultaneously released in three languages – Farsi, Arabian, and English.[22] Google Analytics proved that the comic was indeed read in Iran which was only possible because of its digital nature as the printed book is of course forbidden in Iran. As mentioned before, social media were not only used to organize rallies within Iran but were consciously used to help putting the protests to a global stage and raise awareness internationally. *Zahra's Paradise* would not have been possible without the images and stories shared on-line. Besides those who experienced the riots themselves and uploaded images the Iranian diaspora played a crucial role in spreading news on what was happening in Iran by reposting and sharing pictures, by subtitling videos so non-Farsi speakers could understand them, by organizing protests in support of the Iranian green movement, by being in contact with friends in Iran and sharing their stories in interviews and so on.[23] The webcomic *Zahra's Paradise* is yet another effort to support the riots. Scripted by an exile-Iranian, it intends to keep international attention focused on Iran, keep the memory alive, raise support for the green movement but also show people another side of Iran which they might not know from following the news reports. The webcomic thus does show the recent political and social troubles, the state's Kafkaesque structure and the insanity of brutality but it also shows a country with a rich cultural history. It constantly references its greatest philosophers and poets, as well as its "simple people" and their kindness even towards strangers, and speaks of love and deep friendship independent of religious identity.

Amir and Khalil take the reader through the madness of the current Iranian system which on the one hand idealizes the 1979 revolution while on the other hand clinging to many of the things that led to the revolution in the first place. Fear of the Shah's secret

22 Even before they reached the third chapter, they had sold the rights to about a dozen languages and the webcomic was from then on additionally released in French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Korean, Hebrew, Portugese, German, Swedish, and Finnish.

23 Receiving phone calls is a lot easier than phoning someone outside Iran from within the country (Alexanian 2011, 436).

police was an important motivation in overthrowing the Shah's government in 1979 but the Islamic Republic of Iran still condemns its own people to live in constant fear of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Khalil and Amir paint a glum picture of this country that in their narration is only a shadow of its former glory, a shadow of what it could be. Still, *Zahra's Paradise* never loses hope in the face of oppression. The story thus ends on a hopeful note that in the end, love and the wish for freedom will triumph, opening the door to everyday paradise a little wider.

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Attachments

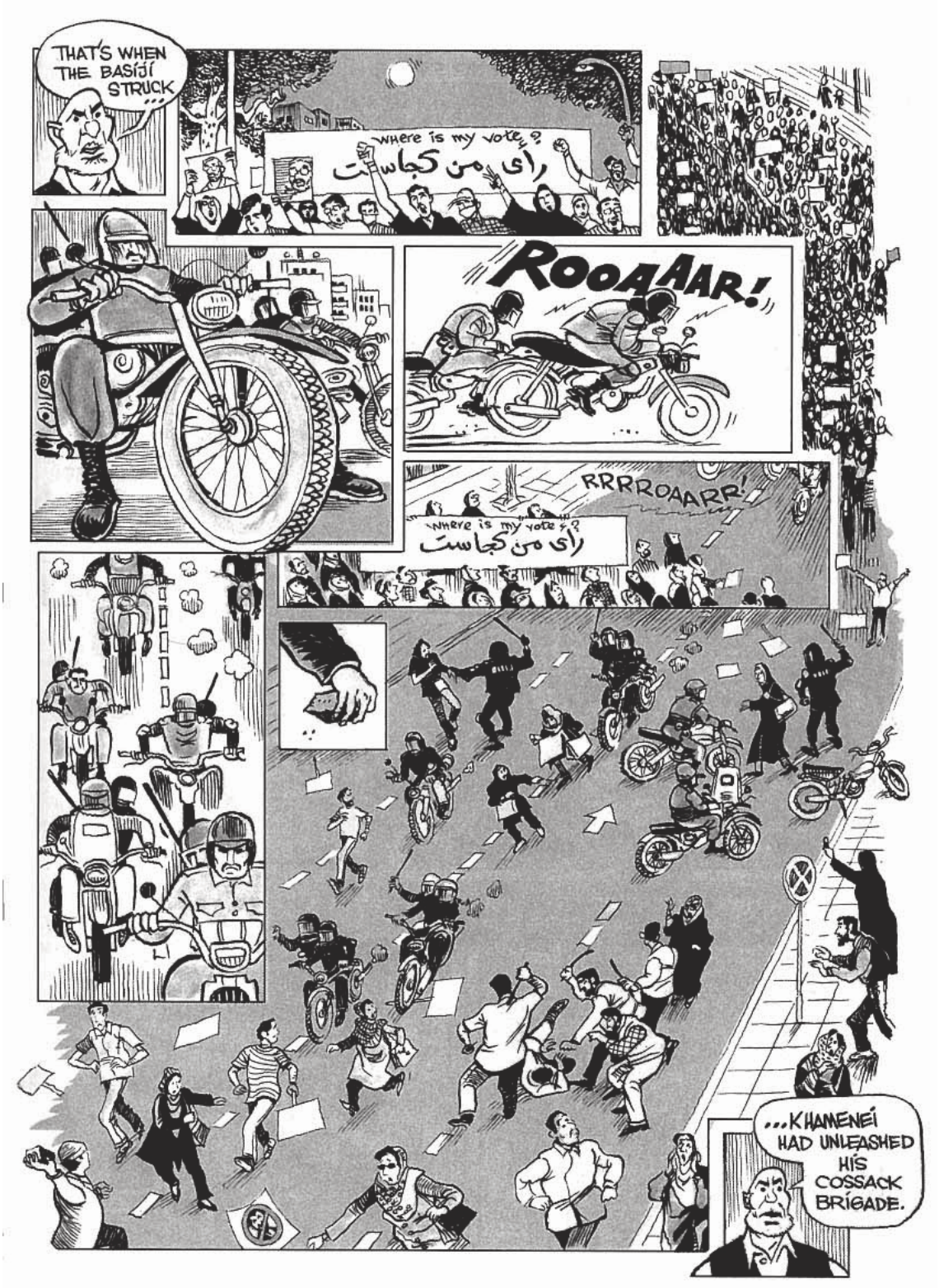

Fig.1 / Khalil & Amir (2011): Zahra's Paradise.

Fig.2 / Khalil & Amir (2011): Zahra's Paradise.

Fig.3 / Khalil & Amir (2011): Zahra's Paradise.

Fig.4 / Khalil & Amir (2011): Zahra's Paradise.

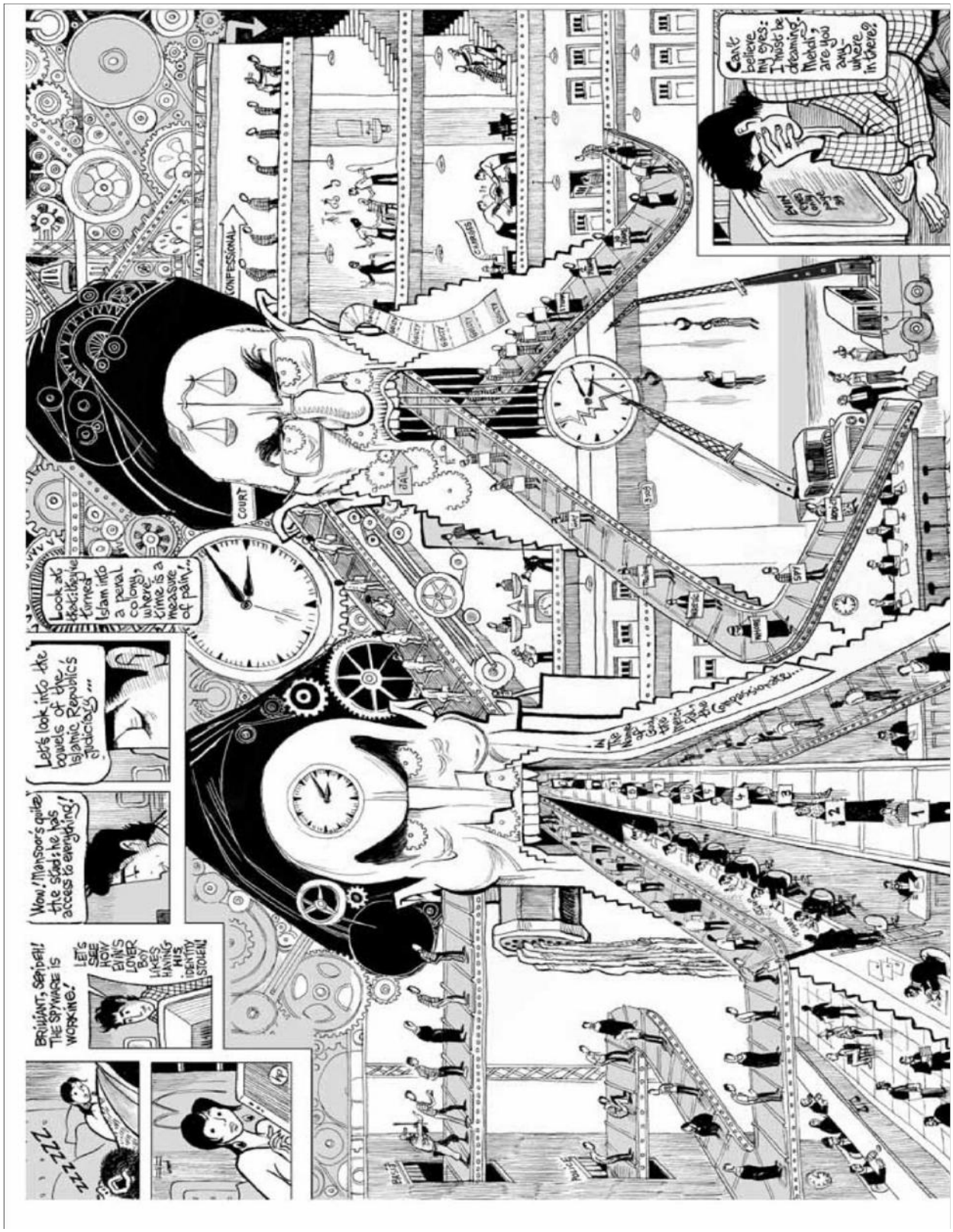

Fig.5 / Khalil & Amir (2011): Zahra's Paradise.