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Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution

Pardis Mahdavi

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There is perhaps no place in the world today where the stakes of partying and having sex are higher than in present-day Iran. Drinking and dancing can lead to arrest by the morality police and a punishment of up to 70 lashes. Consequences for sex outside of marriage can be even more severe—up to 84 lashes, or even public execution.

But even under the threat of such harsh punishment, a sexual revolution is taking place. Iranian youth continually risk personal safety to meet friends, date, and, ultimately, to have sex. In the absence of any option for overt political dissent, young people have become part of a self-proclaimed revolution in which they are using their bodies to make social and political statements. Sex has become both a source of freedom and an act of political rebellion.

With unprecedented access inside turn-of-the century Iran, Pardis Mahdavi offers a firsthand look at the daily lives of Iranian youth. They are given a voice as she tells the stories of their intertwined quests for sexual freedom, political reform, and a better future – but not a future without risk. The sexual revolution is also leading to increased levels of abortion, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and ongoing emotional troubles and mental illnesses, with worrying implications for Iranian youth and Iranian society at large.

Passionate Uprisings is a fascinating, ground-breaking, and personal look into a society that is poorly understood—if it is understood at all—by the majority of Westerners today. Mahdavi's narrative provides not only an invaluable insight into the real lives of much of Iran's population, but shows how sexual politics and the youth culture could even destabilize the current regime and change the course of Iranian politics.

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