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Opinion

From an act of survival in 1979 Iran to a civic duty in 2020 America

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Iranians attend a rally at Azadi (Freedom) square in celebration of the 41st anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Tehran. (Ebrahim Noroozi / AP, File)

By [Jacqueline Saper](#)

Special to The Times

A few days after I turned 18, in March of 1979, my father urged me to vote. As an Iranian citizen in the pivotal year of a revolution, voting enabled me to express my opinion on whether my country was to become the

Islamic Republic. After months of civil unrest, strikes, martial law and demonstrations, the people were now “free” to make the slogan, “Independence, Freedom, the Islamic Republic” become reality. This particular referendum was so instrumental that the government lowered the voting age from 18 to 16. There was only one problem: After 2,500 years of monarchy, no one had ever experienced or knew what Islamic Republic governance would entail.

There and then, I had to cast my vote in front of a few armed men in khaki uniforms and black boots. I was given a two-part ballot with two distinct colors. Green indicated a large printed “Yes” in favor of the Islamic Republic. Red indicated a large printed “No” to reject the Islamic Republic. Under the imperious glares of everyone around me, I carefully separated the perforated ballot into two pieces and inserted the “correct” one in the appropriate box. After I cast my vote, I handed my birth certificate booklet to the official seated at the corner of the table. He turned the pages and firmly imprinted a stamp on the top of page three. Now, I could show my alignment with the new establishment and avoid potential political retribution. On April 1, 1979, following overwhelming support, Iran was declared as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

A few days before I turned 26, in March of 1987, I emigrated to the United States with my husband, daughter and son. I had fled a country where its government demonized the United States as “The Great Satan” and sanctioned ubiquitous chants of “Death to America.” My family first resettled in Texas, where friends and neighbors cheered the Houston Astros’ baseball team’s achievements. But I was most eager to celebrate the forthcoming Independence Day on July 4, this most quintessential American celebration.

Nearly 34 years later since my arrival, as an American citizen, I exercise my right to vote in the privacy of a polling booth amid a pandemic, demand for social equity and a freshly filled vacancy on the United States Supreme Court. As I stand in line to cast my vote in one of the most crucial elections in our history, I will remember my thoughts when I stood in line in Tehran, where anyone in the room could see how each person voted. As I reflect on my personal journey over the past few decades, my vote in 1979, in a nondemocratic society, was an act of survival. In 2020, my vote in a democratic society is an act of civic duty. Leading up to Nov. 3, 2020, my social media feed is filled with contentious and passionate political posts. Remarks, tweets and caricatures of presidential candidates are, at times, humorous, disturbing and thought-provoking.

This election cycle — as is the case in past election cycles — we in America have the freedom of expression to mock or approve our civil servants’ officials. Our collective voices heard through individuals’ private votes will determine the outcome of our leadership. In contrast, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, most power lies in the hand of an unelected official known as the Supreme Leader. Not only can he not be voted out by the citizens’ popular vote, but ridiculing him could entail grave consequences. During this extraordinary year and contentious election season, I find myself thinking of the young girl who cast her first ballot for the referendum that created Iran’s Islamic Republic. Forty-one years ago, I did not have a choice. In 2020, I have a choice. This time my vote ensures democracy in action.

Jacqueline Saper is the author of a memoir, “From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran.” She lives in Illinois.