



H.I.M. Empress
Farah Pahlavi of Iran

Cry Her Beloved Country

Half a century ago, then-Miss Farah Diba married the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who crowned her Shahbanou, or empress, eight years later. This past June, 30 years since the Islamic revolution overthrew the Shah, the Empress watched as her homeland erupted in protest against a disputed presidential election. In a rare and intimate interview with New York gallery owner and longtime family friend **Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller**, the Shahbanou shares her sadness, her memories and her hopes for her compatriots. First, by way of introduction, *Vanity Fair* writer and Reagan biographer **Bob Colacello**, who visited Iran three years before the revolution in 1979 and spent time with the royal family, offers his firsthand insights, as well as a primer on the rich history of this troubled nation.

In July 1976, I traveled to Iran with my then-boss, Andy Warhol, who had been commissioned to paint the portrait of Her Imperial Majesty Empress Farah Pahlavi, a commission I had arranged through the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations, Fereydoun Hoveyda. The Tehran we saw that summer was a growing, prosperous, modern city—just as the Iranian society we encountered was dynamic, affluent and cosmopolitan.

The rich, a group that included a high proportion of Christians, Jews and liberal Bahai Muslims, lived in the hills on the northern side of town. Their villas resembled those of Bel Air or Montecito—except for the Persian carpets beside the pools—and the women wore bikinis by day and Paris couture by night. Closer to downtown, vast middle-class housing developments were under construction, including one by that pioneer of affordable American suburbia, William Levitt. Only in the bazaar in poorer south Tehran did we see women in head-to-toe black chadors, and it was there that the sound of our American accents elicited the occasional, ominous hiss from within the jostling crowds.

The Empress herself was a symbol of how far women had come under the reign of her husband Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a complicated figure who, on one hand, believed in the divine right of kings, and on the other, strove to make his country the most Westernized in the region, abolishing feudalism and emancipating women as part of his White Revolution of 1963. Farah Pahlavi was the first Iranian queen to be given the title of empress, and the first to be named as regent in the event her husband died before their first child, Crown Prince Reza, turned 21. She presided over a staff of 40, and was patron of 24 educational, health and cultural organizations, traveling to the least developed parts of the country to open schools and hospitals. Under her direction, the government brought back thousands of historic Persian artifacts from foreign museums and private collections, and built several museums to house the recovered bronzes, carpets, ceramics and other artworks. In the early 1970s she founded the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, and set about building

a collection that would include nearly 150 works by Monet, Gauguin, Picasso, Magritte, Pollock, Bacon, Johns, Lichtenstein, Agnes Martin and Brice Marden, among numerous others of similar renown. The fact that she would invite Andy Warhol, fresh from Studio 54, to the Imperial Palace and pose for his Polaroid camera showed just how open-minded, not to say hip, Her Imperial Majesty was.

Farah Diba was born on Oct. 14, 1938, in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Her father, Sohrab Diba, the scion of a distinguished diplomatic family, was a graduate of the elite French military academy at St. Cyr and a career officer in the Imperial Iranian Armed Forces, who died when she was nine. An only child, Farah Diba was raised in Tehran by her mother, Farideh Ghotbi, attending private Italian and French

schools before moving to Paris to study at the École Spéciale d'Architecture. She first caught the Shah's eye at a reception at the Iranian Embassy in Paris in the spring of 1959, and he began courting her when she returned to Tehran that summer. They were married on Dec. 21, 1959, in a Shi'a Muslim ceremony at Tehran's Marble Palace. In keeping with traditional customs, the bride, wearing a Dior gown and a two-kilo Harry Winston tiara, set 150 caged nightingales free, was sprinkled with sugar by the Queen Mother and showered in gold coins by the wedding guests.

She was 21; the Shah was 40. He had been married

twice previously, first to Princess Fawzia, the sister of King Farouk of Egypt (with whom he had a daughter), and then to Soraya Esfandiari. As the unions had failed to produce a male heir, they had both ended in divorce. Ten months after her marriage, Empress Farah gave birth to Crown Prince Reza; he was followed by Princess Farahnaz in 1963, Ali Reza in 1966 and Leila in 1970.

The following year, the Shah and Empress marked the founding of the Iranian monarchy by Cyrus the Great 2,500 years earlier with five days of festivities at Persepolis, the ancient capital of the Persian Empire. Conceived to promote historic Iranian culture and to showcase the progress the country had made under the Shah, it was attended by half the crowned heads of Europe and the Middle East, as well as such world leaders as Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, President Josef Tito of Yugoslavia and Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany. But whatever

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prestige it brought to the Pahlavis was eclipsed by criticism of the event's extravagance—250 red Mercedes limousines chauffeured guests from the airport to a 160-acre tent city designed by Jansen of France, banquets were catered by Maxim's, the linens were from Portault, the china was by Limoges, the wines from Chateau Lafite. Press reports claimed expenses ran as high as \$200 million; the official figure was \$22 million.

Eight years later, on Jan. 16, 1979, following 18 months of increasingly violent demonstrations against their rule, the

During the following months, the imperial family fled from country to country—Morocco, the Bahamas, Mexico—seeking permanent asylum while under the constant threat of extradition to Iran, where the Ayatollah was calling for their execution. In October 1979, President Jimmy Carter, under pressure from the Shah's friends Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller, agreed to allow the Shah, who had been diagnosed with lymphoma, into the United States for treatment at New York Hospital. In retaliation, Iranian militants seized



Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, with H.I.M. Shahbanou (Empress) Farah of Iran at her coronation on Oct. 26, 1967. In the group are the Princesses Ashraf, Fatemeh and Chams. At the front are the Emperor's children Prince Reza Pahlavi and Princess Farahnaz Pahlavi.

Shah and Empress Farah departed Iran for Anwar Sadat's Egypt. According to the Empress' recent memoir, *An Enduring Love*, when advisors had urged her husband to put down the uprisings with lethal force, he would always respond, "A dictator can, but not a monarch. I don't want to keep the throne by shedding the blood of my people." The couple's hope was that after a brief absence, during which time order would be restored by an interim government, they would be welcomed back. But less than a month later, that government was toppled by the Islamic revolutionary supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini.

the American embassy in Tehran and took its staff hostage. The Empress and her ailing husband were shuffled off to Panama before finally returning to Cairo, where the Shah died on July 27, 1980.

Empress Farah remained in Cairo until late 1981 when, following Sadat's assassination, President Ronald Reagan invited her to take up residence in the United States. She currently divides her time between homes in Paris and Potomac, MD. She is a frequent visitor to New York, where she mostly attends museum and gallery openings.



There was great rejoicing in Tehran when the Shah of Persia married beautiful 21-year-old architecture student Miss Farah Diba, who became the Empress Farah of Persia. The ceremony took place in the Hall of Mirrors in the Imperial Palace of Tehran in 1959.

AUGUST 3, 2009

LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER: We are on the phone with Empress Farah Pahlavi. Her Majesty has been very kind to give us this interview and her time.

H.I.M. EMPRESS FARAH PAHLAVI: Thank you, thank you for having me.

LH: We are going through very turbulent times in Iran, your Majesty, and my memory of what Iran was before the revolution 30 years ago when my family was still living there, and I was studying abroad, and what it is today are very different. You were my reigning Queen—a beautiful, young leader. People were celebrating your coronation. This week, President Ahmadinejad is being sworn in for a second term after a highly disputed election, and Iran is full of sadness and divisions. What are your thoughts and especially feelings at this time?

FP: Today is a sad day for me because of the swearing in of the President of the Islamic Republic this week. The world has followed the events for this last month. I am full of admiration for all those women and men and mostly the young generation who, in spite of the oppression, came out and wanted their voices heard. I also feel a deep sorrow for the way the government has behaved towards the peaceful march of the Iranian people.

The world has watched on television and read in newspapers what is happening, and so the government has expelled the media. But what is extraordinary is the way Iranian young people are using their cell phones, Twitter and Facebook to send information to the outside world. What is encouraging and fantastic is that the world has supported and talked about

human rights and the right to peaceful marches in Iran. For the first time, so many Iranians living outside of the country have put their ideological and political differences aside and have come out in most of the big cities of the world in support of their compatriots in Iran.

LH: What do you hear from those who tweet you from Iran?

FP: What I hear is very sad. I also hear people's stories on Persian-speaking radio, and other people call me in spite of their fear of being found out. They tell about their misery. One woman said, "Please help us. They are taking the wounded away in ambulances and then once out of the city, they are throwing them out onto the side of the road to die." The stories are really heartbreaking and all they say is, "Please give us courage; talk about our condition outside of Iran."

LH: That is so sad. I remember growing up in a multicultural environment where my friends were Zoroastrian, Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Bahai—and it never mattered. For 2,500 years, Iran was where people came to find refuge when they were expelled from their countries due to their beliefs. During the Shah's reign, for example, all the Jews from Iraq were invited to live in Iran. The government let them start a new life by supporting them and building homes for them.

FP: It has been 30 years that this religious fanaticism has come to our country. During the Pahlavi era, we were a country moving toward modernity, toward progress, and we lived in peace and had good relations with our neighbors. In those days, we were closer to the West because our interest was to be allied with democratic countries. Back then, the Soviet Union on our border was creating a lot of problems. And we had different religious minorities; we had Christians, we had Jewish people, we had Bahais, we had Zoroastrians and we had Sunnis, although a majority were Shiites. There were few problems; we were all friends. Of course, every country has some problems. There were always fanatics and uneducated people, but we were building up public education.

You spoke about my coronation. When the Shah put the crown on my head, I had the feeling that he was crowning all the women of Iran throughout our history. Thousands of years ago, we had women as rulers. In 1963, we had what we called the White Revolution, which gave women equitable opportunities and emancipation. The laws were changed so women could reach any level of education. Polygamy was outlawed. After a divorce, women could win child custody. Salaries were made equal. Women could become ambassadors, ministers or members of parliament. Nobel

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Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi was a judge in our time. We were respected in the rest of the world.

Today, women cannot become judges because the regime believes that women are not wise enough and the testimony of one man is equal to the testimony of two women. They believe the blood of one man is equal to the price of the blood of two women. However, women can still vote and still be elected, but to be elected they have to have the same mentality as the regime. In my mind, these are not really liberated women.

LH: I remember traveling to villages in Azerbaijan before the revolution, and many people had homes, many had televisions to be able to learn about the rest of the world. Every family was provided with an education, which became mandatory. I remember you once asked me what I was studying, and I told you art history. You encouraged me by saying, "We are opening museums and we need curators."

Right now, we see women playing a major role in these protests; Neda has become a brave symbol. This movement has been called the Lipstick Revolution. What is the role of women in this uprising?

FP: The women are the ones who have suffered in this regime more than anyone else. They have been insulted and many of their rights have been taken away. They have been flogged and stoned and even young people who are still minors are hanged. It is the mothers who suffer the most.

Today, the young demonstrators want modernity; they want relations with the rest of the world. Thirty years ago, the events in Iran were largely led by the clergy; this time events are mostly being led by the young, mostly women. I will not call this the Lipstick Revolution. I prefer to call it the Diamond Revolution. They wanted to make our women like charcoal, but under heat and pressure, diamonds are coming out.

LH: I would like you to talk about the Shah's legacy. In the United States and Europe, his rule has been characterized as "oppressive." Can you address this issue? Why was he overthrown?

FP: In those days, young people were very much attracted by Communism and thought that Communism would bring them equality and justice. Of course, history has shown that this is not the way. I don't say there weren't any problems in our country, but my husband always said that he wanted his son to reign differently than he did. There was so much propaganda against the Shah. It was like mass hysteria in Iran.

People might ask why the revolution happened. We had our shortcomings; every country has some problems, but we didn't need such a horrible revolution.

In the beginning, the demonstrators were calling for more political freedom. The religious people were against modernity and progress. In those days, there were so many different political ideologies which were against the monarchy. Khomeini's followers portrayed their leader as someone who will be a holy person, who will be in the holy city and who will protect human rights and women's rights.

Today, some of those who were against the Shah have had the courage to come out and say, "We made a mistake." I have even heard some of the Communist intellectuals say, "We were wrong to create this anti-Shah hysteria. We should have supported the positive things he did, and just criticized the negative." The propaganda about us was so strong and untrue, and continues today because the Islamic Republic still needs to make the past look terrible.

But I receive e-mails from young people in Iran who were born after the revolution. They write such kind words to me, which is very encouraging because these are people who have only heard negative things about the past.

LH: What were your fears for our country at the time of the Iranian revolution?

FP: When this movement started in Iran, we were worried because we knew they were going somewhere that was not right. I was trying to tell people, "Think twice about what you're doing. Do you think that a religious clergy can bring you what you hold as freedom and democracy and human rights?" It was a big question mark.



H.I.M. Shahbanou (Empress) Farah of Iran at her coronation.



The Shah and Shahbanou Farah of Iran chat with President John F. Kennedy and first lady Jackie during their visit to the United States in 1962.

Before the revolution, we had problems. We were a developing country. We needed time.

LH: America currently has two wars going on in the region—in Afghanistan and Iraq. How do you think things would have been different if the Pahlavi reign had continued?

FP: Unfortunately in my view, because of what happened in Iran 30 years ago, the stability and security of the region went away. In my opinion, if Iran had stayed the way it was, look where we would have been today in the family of nations. There wouldn't be this problem in Afghanistan, nor would there have been the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq would never have dared to even send a plane over our country. The Gulf War wouldn't have happened, nor would any of the problems in the area over the past 30 years, including the exporting of religious fanaticism throughout the Muslim countries. This all happened after the Iranian revolution, which is very sad.

LH: I would love for this generation to know about the Iran I grew up in, when you were our reigning Queen and did so much to encourage culture and the arts. You also worked hard to restore so many of our historic ruins. You asked my family to donate our ancestral home in Azerbaijan to the state, which you restored and made into a museum, the Baghchejigh Palace of Makou. I recently spoke with an artist who lives in Iran, and he told me you are like Cinderella to him, a fairy tale.

You are an icon in so much of today's artwork. I was very sad to see a book on Azerbaijan showing 18th century French statues of nudes, now dressed and covered in uniforms. What is your message to current artists in Iran who are being censored?

FP: Covering the nudes is of course sad, but that's the least of it. This regime wants to change the past. I admired our culture and our civilization like any other Iranian and wanted to protect and preserve it. We had a minister of culture, and the people were interested. They called me from different parts of the country saying, "Here is the tomb of a famous philosopher," or, "There are some old ruins." We were trying to restore them to keep those ancient artifacts.

But I also was supporting our contemporary artists in every field. We could not only live in our past. We built modern art museums, like the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran. We also had the Museum of Negarestan with paintings and objects of the Qajar period. But unfortunately, I have heard that they have sent the collection somewhere else and have transformed it into a place for the guardians of the revolution.

For 10 years, we had the Festival of Shiraz, which was extraordinary. We hosted traditional artists from Iran and avant-garde artists like Robert Wilson, who was not so well known in those



H.I.M. Shahbanou (Empress) Farah of Iran with Princess Leila at a dinner for President Jimmy Carter in the Niavaran Palace.

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days, even in America. Great jazz musicians from America like Max Roche came to Iran. Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey and John Cage performed. Groups from Africa, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam and all over the world came to the festival.

Iranian artists today are so courageous and admirable because in spite of all the pressure and the censorship, they have the courage to paint, to make films, to make sculptures. Some of them are very political and there are not a lot of places where they can show their art in Iran, so they use their own homes, and send the work outside of Iran for exhibits. The authorities have not been able to stop the creativity of Iranians. In the beginning of this revolution, even traditional musicians were not allowed to play. But art has survived.

LH: You brought so much culture to the country and that is why you have become the symbol of hope for so many artists who are working under difficulty. For the first time ever in America, the Chelsea Art Museum has shown 56 Iranian artists working outside and inside Iran, and the West is able to see the heritage of our country. Since 1982, I have been showing Iranian art in my gallery and you always take the time to meet and patronize my artists.

Looking ahead, what do you see as your place in Iran's history?

FP: I will leave it to history to decide what my role has been.

LH: Will you tell us what the Shah was like as a man?

FP: It's been 50 years this October since I married the Shah. When I was growing up, my family loved our King, as so many Iranians did in those days. My family had worked for the monarchy. We always loved our King because he was the symbol of our country. He was above all political parties. He was the symbol of the unification of Iran. He was a truly civilized, kind man, very gracious and patient. We had a happy life together and he was a great father to his children, in spite of all his work and responsibilities.

LH: I met you when you weren't yet the Empress. You were a very close friend of my cousin's growing up. You went to school together and you often visited my home with her. Strangely enough, my father actually went to college in America with Ambassador Zahedi, who introduced you to the Shah. My mother always said, "You should look up to Farah. She is such a fabulous woman, and you should grow



Empress Farah of Iran (right) with Queen Elizabeth II of England on the latter's first official visit to Iran.

up to be like her." My family always felt that as Queen, you never changed. You were always so humble and so approachable. You were called the Queen of the People.

FP: Thank you so much, and I thank your mother for her kind comments and yours, also. I asked my husband, many years after our wedding, "Why did you choose me?" He said, "I liked that you were so natural." I guess it's just my good fortune. I am who I am, and I remain the same because I love my country and I love my compatriots. For 20 years, I was the Queen of Iran and I've been through a lot of pain like so many of my compatriots. I have had so many positive things in my life and also negative, so I hope I have gained some wisdom and some experience about life. I see that life is a struggle for all of us, no matter who we are and no matter where we are. We might lose our country, our loved ones, our possessions, our position, but we must not lose our hope. I don't keep bitterness in my heart; I believe in love and compassion.

LH: When you meet Iranians today, do they recognize you? If so, how do they react to you?

FP: Years ago, but after the revolution, I was on a plane and I



The Shah and H.I.M. Shahbanou (Empress) Farah of Iran on an official visit to India with Indira Gandhi.

when I am in New York, I feel I always have to explain that I am not a fundamentalist.

FP: Yes, it's very sad. Because of what has happened in Iran, many Iranians in America have had to hide their nationality because some Americans could not differentiate between all kinds of Iranians. Fortunately, this image is changing.

But even in America, going through immigration at the airport, I am met with kindness and a smile from older people because they remember what Iran was before and the relationship that Iran had with the United States under the Shah.

LH: Yes, growing up in Iran, we loved America. We were one of America's biggest allies in the Middle East. We had

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saw a gentleman with a beard, and I wondered if he was a compatriot. Another gentleman approached me and said, “May I introduce you to the ambassador of Iran?” Of course, for his safety, I don't dare say where it happened or who he was. The ambassador spoke to me with so much kindness, saying, “We remember your activities—social activities, cultural activities.”

I asked him, “Why were you against us? Was it because you had leftist ideas or you were religious?”

He said, “I was very religious.”

Then when the plane landed, as we were getting off at the airport, I told him, “Go in front of me because I don't want your people to see you with someone who is ‘Corrupt on Earth,’” because that's what they called all of us, “Corrupt on Earth.” Sometimes I have a little sense of humor. That helps in life.

LH: I find that as an Iranian-American,



Empress Farah Pahlavi of Iran and her family at the funeral of her husband Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, in 1980 (seen here with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt).

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Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, with H.I.M. Shahbanou (Empress) Farah of Iran, circa 1977, two years before the revolution in Iran which ended the Shah's rule.

New York, and the interesting thing is that years later, one of the demonstrators saw me in Paris and said, “I was one of those who was demonstrating against you in New York, and when I went to Iran and listened to two speeches of Khomeini, I realized what a big mistake I made.” He came to me and kneeled and said, “I want to beg your pardon.” This was also the period when my husband was in the hospital and the hostages were taken.

LH: That was a terrible time. What do you think is going to happen in Iran now?

FP: Well it's difficult to predict, but I think what has been happening in Iran recently goes beyond the elections. Those young Iranian people who have the means to see what's happening in the rest of the world are educated, they're very politicized. In my opinion, they want a better life, they want human

strong relationships with many different administrations prior to the revolution.

FP: I was happy when President Obama sent a message for our new year, Nowrouz, recognizing that we are an old country and an old civilization.

LH: I was in tears when I heard President Obama's speech about the Persian New Year and how he referred to our culture and our rich heritage. I felt that was a very positive speech. Jon Bon Jovi and Joan Baez were singing for solidarity with the people of Iran.

FP: And even Madonna!

LH: This year, Mayor Bloomberg invited Iranian Americans to Gracie Mansion for Nowrouz. It is wonderful to see all of these changes happening.

I know that you love New York and you visit often.

FP: Well New York, for me, is a fascinating city. I can't say that all my memories of New York are good. The first time that I saw a picture of Khomeini in a demonstration was in

rights, they want freedom and they want democracy. But what's interesting to me is there is a rift and a fissure even among the religious people. With the support of the international community, the freedom-loving countries of the world will support the freedom-loving people of Iran. I hope they will reach what they deserve in the end.

LH: Is there a last message that you want to offer to the people of Iran?

FP: My message to the Iranian people, with all my heart, is that I am with them and especially with those who have lost their loved ones. We are all thinking of them and in every way supporting them so that they can come out of this misery and have the future that they deserve. They deserve a life of freedom, democracy and human rights, and for their children to live in a free and progressive society.

To the security people, we have heard that some of you regret the way that you behaved with your compatriots. These are your brothers, these are your sisters, these are your mothers and fathers. Your children have to live in a better future in Iran.

With all my heart, I am with my compatriots. ♦