

Islamic rulers relax taboo against having pet dogs after 25 years

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TEHRAN, Iran — At a public park here, Iran's dogs finally had their day.

It's been a long wait for the canines.



MAJID MARDANIAN/Special
(ENLARGE)

Canines get the red carpet treatment in a Tehran park, strutting with their owners in Iran's first dog show since the 1979 Islamic revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power.

After the Islamic revolution of 1979, the theocrats who took power imposed — along with modest clothing for women and a ban on alcohol beverages — a taboo on owning dogs.

Dog owners were hassled and sometimes faced fines for walking their dogs in public.

But recently, Iran held a Festival of Domesticated Animals, a pet show where dog lovers were allowed to show their pets publicly without fear for the first time since the revolution.

"We usually don't take our dog to places where she can be seen by other people," said 29-year-old Hale, cuddling her mixed terrier, Nabat ("sugar candy" in Farsi), at the animal festival. "We often feel that if we take her somewhere public, the police will bother us."

According to Islamic teachings, including writings by the spiritual leader of the revolution, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, dogs are considered "impure," although the use of dogs for purposes such as guarding property or personal protection is allowed.

Sayyed Javid Aledavoud, president of the Iran Society for the Protection and Cure of Animals, said dog owners over the years have encountered an array of problems when walking their pets outdoors, even though the taboo was never written into law.

"Some authorities act on their own accord," he said. "They sometimes detain animals and take the owners to court to be fined. They have impounded cars."

Since there is no law governing domesticated pets and their owners, local authorities can choose to crack down on dogs at their discretion.

"So it's possible that one day one person says you [the dogs] are free; tomorrow another person says, 'No, you're not free,'" Aledavoud said.

But the fact that the government sanctioned the pet show, held Sept. 10 at Tehran's Darabad Park, has given long-suffering dog owners hope that the times are changing.

Many say they are hassled less than they used to be for walking their dogs.

And the image of canines has been helped by the effectiveness of dogs used to sniff out illegal drugs and search-and-rescue dogs deployed after an earthquake killed and injured tens of thousands of people in December in the southeastern city of Bam.

"People are becoming more familiar with dogs and little by little understand how they must treat dogs," said Amir Rahbari, 31, whose Great Dane named DJ has gained fame from acting as a guard dog in four movies and a TV series. "I am happy that a festival such as this is happening in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It's a good step. We have very good dogs in Iran, but no one sees them."

In an effort to create rules that dog owners can live by, Aledavoud's organization has sent a draft bill to the country's parliament to create legislation governing domesticated pets.

The bill outlines regulations for keeping animals at home and transporting them outside. Aledavoud said parliament has not yet discussed the proposal.

In another hopeful sign, the country's first 24-hour private pet hospital recently opened, something that would have been unlikely a few years ago.

"It was very hard to get [government] permission," said Dr. Payam Mohebi, the owner. "I put a lot of pressure on them. But now they've given me permission, it shows a changing of culture. They finally agreed that animals also exist."