

From division to unity President's arts policy builds bridges

PERSPECTIVE

When president Raisi's government got to work, one of the most pressing concerns for some Iranians was the potential closure of the culture and art arena and the subsequent construction of metaphorical walls between various groups of individuals. However, the issue of culture and art was addressed with great consideration. Throughout the tenure of the previous government, led by the late president Ebrahim Raisi, there were numerous achievements that demonstrated a renewed emphasis on culture and art, an area of concern that had perhaps previously been largely neglected. During his tenure, supporting artists, promoting Iranian art, and elevating the quality of artistic expression were identified as key priorities, and a series of comprehensive measures were implemented to ensure their realization.

Governing fields of art, cinema, theater, and music were fraught with an intricate network of challenges throughout the past three years when the previous government was in office. Nevertheless, upon reflection, it becomes clear that the efforts at the management of these cultural and artistic realms can be commended as the preservation of the principles of Iran's Islamic Revolution remained a cornerstone of such ef-

forts. This attention to the principles resulted in a thriving cultural landscape that can be deemed admirable despite facing the most stringent cultural boycott project ever orchestrated by hostile entities.

For all the concerted efforts of enemy forces and their pawns within the country to promote an all-encompassing boycott of cultural and artistic events, the previous government was able

to triumphantly host the Fajr film and theater festivals, as well as facilitate the organization of numerous concerts in Tehran and other provinces, coupled with film screenings. Under these challenging conditions, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance adopted a management strategy aimed at preventing societal polarization and division, thereby achieving its objective of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the nation.

Breaking 23-year-old record

A closer inspection of the surge in the production and sales of cinematic works over the past two to three years proves the aptitude of Raisi's government for navigating a steady course away from excitement, ultimately surpassing several historical records that had stood for several years prior. This uptick in viewership and sales had ripple effects, elevating the production and filmmaking processes throughout the country, and boosting the economic livelihood of nearly 17,000 who depend on the cinematic industry. The government's management of the cinema was able to usher in record-breaking sales without crossing boundaries. The pinnacle of this record-breaking movie sales streak was in the Iranian calendar year 1402 (ended March 19, 2024). Deemed a pivotal marker in the national film industry, the number of moviegoers in 1402 surpassed the previous 23 years, shattering multiple records. Riding on this wave, Iranian cinema sales soared to 1,216 billion Tomans (over \$20 million).

In conjunction with building confidence with the specialized community of artists, particularly in the realm of cinema, Raisi's government recognized the vital importance of earning the support of the nation. The diverse range of artists whose works were featured at various festivals in the past three years is indicative of the government's ability to strike a healthy balance between these

two key constituencies. One significant example that epitomized this approach was the meeting held on March 15, 2024, in which the deceased president met with artists from a variety of fields including poetry, cinema, calligraphy, music, and literature. In his speech, he regarded cultural capability as a pivotal element of national power, akin to defense and economic capabilities. He stressed the importance of giving the country's art and culture scene the attention it deserves.

What provides further evidence of this confidence of the art body with president Raisi and his government are the messages and interviews of artists and actors published on the occasion of the president's tragic accident. For example, Poursan Derakhshandeh, a renowned screenwriter and director, commented, "I was touched by their martyrdom. What happened is not good at all. This event will have many (negative) psychological effects on people. I am sorry and affected by this tragedy; in the past years, there have been bitter incidents in which we have lost some officials. However, this bitter incident left us in awe."

Ebrahim Hatamikia, another prominent cinema director, added his own voice to the collective outpouring of grief, writing: "On the last day of Ordibehesht (the second Iranian calendar month), when the news of the martyrdom of Ayatollah Raisi and his accompanying team was published, our

hearts trembled and we were stunned. Today, we saw one of the most bitter events in the history of this land and we whispered to ourselves, 'Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un' (meaning 'indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed, to Him we return.'). I offer my condolences for this heartbreaking, bitter, and terrible incident. It is hoped that this critical phase will pass with peace and unity in line with the interests and expediency of dear Iran, away from political and factional differences." Alirum Nouraei, a film and television actor, also wrote: "I offer my condolences to the noble people of Iran for the martyrdom of Ayatollah Raisi and their honorable companions, and I pray for the survivors' patience and health from the one Allah." Alongside the aforementioned points, the previous government's accomplishments in the realm of art include the establishment of 231 movie theaters across various provinces of the country. Moreover, the simultaneous strengthening of the private sector while preserving governmental capacities in the film industry can be considered another hallmark of managerial performance during this period. The government's commitment to supporting the private sector was evident in the impressive sales figures of private sector films and their substantial presence in film festivals.



The late president Ebrahim Raisi (2nd-R) and his minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad-Mehdi Esmaeili (C) stand alongside veteran actors of Iran in a meeting on March 15, 2024. president.ir

Music rhythm was fast

A noteworthy accomplishment of president Raisi's government was attaining a balanced frequency of monthly concerts across the nation. Regardless of genre, which encompassed pop, traditional, and regional music, these concerts facilitated the establishment of cultural equity throughout the country. People living in provinces outside the capital were afforded the opportunity to attend live performances by their favorite singers, leveling the playing field in terms of accessibility. This recalibration translated into an average of 500 monthly concerts nationwide, drawing an audience of approximately one million people based on the average capacity of the performance venues.

From several perspectives, the aforementioned concert frequency can be considered a significant development: Firstly, the number of monthly concerts has never reached

this level in recent years, demonstrating an unprecedented level of cultural activity. Secondly, never before in recent times have all the provinces of the country enjoyed equal access to diverse musical performances. Finally, the enthusiasm for concerts in the past never translated into such a substantial monthly audience, highlighting an overall growth in cultural engagement.

Contrary to the forebodings of some at the onset of president Raisi's tenure, his administration did not usher in an era of cultural isolationism and censorship, as many had feared. Rather, his three-year record reveals a commitment to elevating the significance of culture and art in both rhetoric and action. To that end, Raisi and his administration actively encouraged the stewards of these fields to actualize planned initiatives, resulting in a more vibrant and accessible cultural landscape.

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On the third day of the 42nd edition of the Fajr International Film Festival, a crowd of people gathers outside a film theatre at Milad Tower in Tehran, Iran, on February 3, 2024. IRNA