

WORDS | MARK HODGKINSON

fighting spirit

WHEN ARAVANE REZAI WON GOLD for the Islamic Republic of Iran, she did so in front of a female-only audience. Sporting conventions differ in Tehran from those in her birth country, France, but the enthusiasm for the game and determination to win are the same in both cultures.

Born in Saint Etienne to Iranian immigrant parents, who spoke Farsi to her at home, Rezaei holds both French and Iranian passports and, despite normally playing for France, has twice represented Iran in the Women's Islamic Games. She has built up an extensive fan base in both Paris and Tehran, especially after she broke into the world's top 20 this year.

It's perhaps not surprising that the 23-year-old star has attracted her share of criticism. Just before last year's election, she presented Iran's president with some racquets, while a television interview she did ended up in his promotional video, prompting Iranian exiles and French observers alike to complain that she should stay out of politics and focus on her tennis instead.

But there are not many international tennis players who have to deal with this level of controversy. She has even suggested that some of the problems she had with the French tennis authorities were because she was not, to use her phrase, "pure French".

Rezaei, though, suffers from another problem, one all too common in professional tennis: that of having an overbearing father. In France, Ansalan Rezaei has a reputation as something of a bully. When Aravane was rising up the youth rankings, he and the other tennis dads did not get along, and the French Tennis

"ARAVANE REZAI DID NOT HAVE THE SAME CHILDHOOD AS THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE. BUT NOW SHE HAS THIS VIOLENCE INSIDE HER AND SHE KNOWS HOW TO BRING IT OUT"

Federation were once so concerned about the possibility of violence at a junior tournament that they hired bodyguards. As a result the Rezaei family have been viewed as trouble-makers and Aravane's career has suffered. She was banned from the national French training camp at Roland Garros after she and her father got into a heated altercation with a coach.

His dedication to his daughter's tennis career, however, was never in any doubt. It was after watching Yannick Noah win the men's singles title at the 1983 French Open that Ansalan Rezaei, a former car mechanic, decided he would nurture a tennis star.

With little money, Aravane and her family often slept in the back of a camper van when they travelled to tournaments, and, unable to regularly train on indoor courts or at outdoor facilities with artificial lights, she would sometimes play late at night on courts that were illuminated only by their van's headlights.

"I had lots of problems to train this girl: lack of money and lack of courts," Ansalan said recently. "There were neighbours who bothered me. They accused me, saying that this man was killing this child. But today she's not dead. She's happy."

These days Aravane is also coached by Patrick Mouratoglou, who has an academy outside Paris. He has said that Rezaei's difficulties during her adolescence have helped galvanise her for the challenges ahead in the professional game. "She did not have the same childhood as the majority of people. It was tough for her, she has this violence inside her and she knows how to bring it out. That's her strength."

Despite everything, Rezaei has become an elite tennis player: at one tournament in Madrid this spring, she beat three former world number ones in Justine Henin, Jelena Jankovic and Venus Williams to win the title.

"I am proud to represent Muslim women," says Rezaei. "I know I am a model for other girls and I can give them power and help to improve their lives. I am here and I want to show that I am a fighter." ❖



COURTING CONTROVERSY: Her unexpected victory at the Madrid Open in May pushed Aravane Rezaei to a career-best ranking of 16th in the world



bmi flies between London Heathrow and Tehran daily. For more information and to book flights, visit flybmi.com

