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# Iran in Ferment

## CRACKS IN THE REGIME

*Abbas Milani*

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Since the 12 June 2009 election, when the triumvirate of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and the high command of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) organized an electoral coup, the world has witnessed the emergence of a new Iran, even if it is one that in some ways is still struggling to be born. Pictures of bearded Islamic zealots waving clenched fists or of the anti-Semitic Ahmedinejad with a snide smile on his sinister face suddenly gave way to that of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman whose videotaped murder at the hands of regime goons made her the face of a new Iranian democratic movement. This movement has not been crushed even by months of brutal repression, yet neither has it carried the day and pushed the Islamic Republic of Iran toward a decisively more democratic alternative. The Islamic Republic is still standing, but it is showing signs of strain.

Millions of silent, disciplined demonstrators, marching as one to protest what they considered a stolen election, showed the world a people defiant and determined to have their votes counted—a people resolved to be citizens of a modern democracy that respects their rights rather than subjects of a medieval theocracy ruled by “guardians” under an allegedly divine mandate. Overnight, the speculations of those who before June 12 had been declaring the Iranian democratic movement dead were shown to have had no relation to reality. Suddenly, those who had been claiming that a rock-solid theocracy stood at the head of the emerging “Shi’ite crescent” proved to have overestimated the power and unity of the Iranian regime.

In today’s theocratic Iran, everyone remains guilty until proven innocent. The ruling mullahs and their lieutenants operate on the premise

that each citizen's every deed or word is potentially both a crime and an act of disobedience. Now more than ever, the regime aspires to achieve the clinical brutality and efficiency of totalitarian terror—a terror that is random in appearance for maximum efficiency but precise in implementation for maximum economy of force; savage but calculated; and tactically nimble even if strategically sclerotic. This will to terrorize is rooted in a paranoid and polarized worldview most recently on display in the form of a Stalin-style show trial, on bizarrely trumped-up charges, of a hundred leaders from the reform movement that has become known as the Green Wave.

As in Stalin's original Moscow production back in the 1930s, most of those who today stand accused in Tehran's revival of this totalitarian drama are people with decades of service to the regime on their records. Reliable reports of rapes of male and female prisoners by regime thugs and prison officials have added a new level of brutality and bestiality to the current wave of terror. Some IRGC commanders want to push still further down this road, and have publicly demanded treason trials not only for presidential candidates Mir Hosein Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi, but even for ex-president Mohammad Khatami. Some have hinted that former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is also on the list. In the commanders' concocted narrative, Iran is the target of a plot laid long ago by the West, particularly the United States. In fact, in anticipation of a possible uprising against the regime hard-liners' planned but clumsily executed electoral coup, IRGC chief Mohammad Ali Jafari made a name for himself by studying how to stop any form of velvet revolution. Only recently, he reiterated that a velvet revolution is now the greatest challenge to the regime, and that guarding against such a "soft threat" is the IRGC's top priority.<sup>1</sup>

One of those languishing in detention is Saeed Hajarian, a onetime deputy minister of intelligence. Something of an Iranian Yuri Andropov, Hajarian warned as long as fifteen years ago that if the regime wanted to survive, it would have to reform. He helped Khatami become president and for his pains was wounded in a hard-liners' assassination attempt.

In retrospect, Hajarian's change of heart was less an individual reawakening than part of a larger process. A clue to its dimensions became apparent soon after the electoral coup, when Ahmedinejad fired the intelligence minister and four of his deputies. A far larger purge is reportedly on the way. There are reliable indications that many in the ministry either sympathize with the reform movement or simply do not believe the triumvirate's paranoid "Western conspiracy" theory of all that has happened since June 12, and see it instead for what it is: an outpouring of deep and genuine popular discontent. Hajarian, in other words, is not an aberration but part of a stream of opinion in a key part of the security apparatus—and Ahmedinejad knows this.

The ongoing Iranian political crisis took a surprising new turn when

another major rift within the IRGC-Khamenei-Ahmedinejad triumvirate became public. On July 17, Ahmedinejad named Rahim Mashai, his intellectual mentor, most controversial aide, and in-law (the president's son is married to Mashai's daughter) to the all-important post of first deputy president. The next day, Khamenei countermanded the appointment, but Ahmedinejad refused to back down.

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Powerful conservative clerics and IRGC commanders immediately complained about the defiance implicit in Ahmedinejad's decision to ignore an order from the supreme leader. Others have found a variety of other reasons, ranging from bizarre to esoteric, to object to Mashai. One group claims to have solid evidence that Mashai is the secret disciple of an Indian guru who claims to be four-hundred years old and to have

knowledge of future events. Others complained because they suspected that Mashai lacked confidence in Islam's ability to solve modern problems.

Ahmedinejad continued to dig in and double down, heaping more praise on his friend and relative (intermarriage is a crucial but understudied habit of the Iranian political elite, creating an intricate and almost incestuous web of interlocking families in the regime's upper reaches), and finally giving in to Khamenei's command only after a full week had gone by. In the meantime, there had been a cabinet rebellion that ended with the president sacking the ministers of intelligence, labor, and Islamic guidance. In a final note of brazen defiance against Khamenei and nearly the entire senior clerical establishment, Ahmedinejad brought Mashai back to the president's office as chief of staff and special advisor. At the time of this writing in late August 2009, sources in Iran are reporting that Mashai is playing a key role in making appointments to the new cabinet, and that all who opposed him in the past have been purged from the list of potential cabinet ministers.

The tussle over Mashai presages even greater acrimony to come when Ahmedinejad tries to obtain a vote of confidence for his new cabinet from the Majlis (parliament). Additional data points that might be cited to show the regime's internal splits include: 1) maneuvering by Ahmedinejad's camp to oust Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, who has been less than lukewarm in his support of the electoral coup;<sup>2</sup> and 2) former but still-influential IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai's August 11 open letter to Larijani urging the legislature to stop Ahmedinejad from wrecking the economy and placing cronies atop key ministries. Rezai also openly criticized the president's purge of the Intelligence Ministry.

While Ahmedinejad nurses his delusions of grandeur, the IRGC con-

tinues to grow into a stronger force in economics, politics, military and intelligence affairs, and the media. The president has now named as his defense minister Ahmad Vahidi, who commanded the IRGC's infamous Qods Force when it allegedly took part in the July 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, that killed 85 people. With the IRGC already in charge of domestic security and the nuclear portfolio, the Vahidi appointment all but completes the IRGC commanders' seizure of power.

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In an apparent effort to appease the increasingly powerful presence of women in politics, Ahmedinejad has even nominated three women for his cabinet. This is a first in postrevolutionary Iran, though the Shah's regime had a female minister as early as 1968. Khamenei, meanwhile, has seen his authority dwindle drastically since the electoral coup. In a grim irony, even that coup's major beneficiary (Ahmedinejad) has shown

himself willing to join the many clerics who have felt free lately to challenge, ignore, or even outright defy Iran's once all-powerful supreme leader.

There have been many signs not merely of rifts within the clerical leadership, but of open challenges to the authority and even basic qualifications of Khamenei as supreme leader. These signs include public (albeit unsigned) letters from powerful groups of clergy in Qom, as well as former Majlis members, demanding that the Assembly of Experts—a body of 86 clerics charged with oversight of the supreme leader and empowered by law to remove him—convene an emergency meeting to look into whether Khamenei still has the wisdom and impartiality to rule. Moreover, many of the most powerful ayatollahs—the highest authorities in Shi'ism—have in recent weeks openly defied Khamenei, dismissed the election, and either called for a fresh vote or else implied that even that will no longer be sufficient. Among these are the ayatollahs Hosein Ali Montazeri, Yousof Sanei, Jalaluddin Taheri, and Hosein Musavi Tabrizi.

But the most politically significant intraclerical rift has been the one that appears to widen each day and pits two of the regime's pillars against each other. Rafsanjani has on more than one occasion challenged decisions by Khamenei, and the latter has more than once responded by threatening Rafsanjani with the "wrath" of the people. Part of what is in store in Iran's future will be determined by the outcome of this battle of clerical titans.

Yet Khamenei still has Iran's oil revenues under his control, and the

IRGC and the Basij paramilitaries have so far remained behind him. He can therefore hang on even as his foes, particularly in the ranks of the democratic forces, become more popular with each fresh revelation of the regime's cruelty in violently suppressing peaceful demonstrators. But sooner or later, as Iranian history shows, the forces that a tyrant uses to quell and contain the population develop an appetite to rule in their own name. Whereas Khomeini worked hard to keep the IRGC away from politics, Khamenei tried from the outset to make up for his lack of clerical seniority by relying on a directly politicized IRGC. Sooner or later, the chickens of this dangerous game will come home to roost, and Khamenei might find the IRGC making him an offer he cannot refuse. Thus Iran is wading through a kind of political limbo: The order that existed before June 12 is a dead man walking, but those who represent a more democratic future have still not mustered enough power and resolve to bring about the needed change.

#### NOTES

1. Fars News Agency, "IRGC Commander Calls for All-Out Confrontation Against Soft Threats," 11 August 2009, available at <http://english.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nm=8805201294>.

2. It should be noted that Khamenei's mid-August appointment of Larijani's brother to head the judiciary has made the task facing the anti-Larijani forces more complicated.