

## TURMOIL IN IRAN: THE DAWN OF THE POST-KHOMEINI ERA?\*

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It was 30 years ago, on February 1, 1979, that Ayatollah Khomeini returned triumphantly to Iran following 15 years of exile. An estimated crowd of five million gave him a heroes' welcome for he was the Imam, a divine-like figure rooted in the Shi'a faith. He was also the leader of the Islamic revolution that will go down to history as one of the greatest mass rebellions that succeeded in overthrowing the *ancien regime*, that of the Shah. It was a regime supported and armed by the United States and was considered unshakeable. But in the course of 1978, it gradually but steadily lost its legitimacy until it was eventually overthrown. The ideology of the revolution was based on Shi'a Islam; its leadership was provided by the *ulama*, the learned men of religion, the clergy; and its organization was based on the vast network of mosques throughout the country. For the overwhelming majority of Iranians, Shi'a Islam represented a liberating force from the secular and oppressive regime of the Shah seen as subservient to the United States. The Iranian people never forgot the August 1953 coup that overthrew the democratically elected Premier Mohammed Mossadeq and restored the Shah to his throne. The coup was jointly engineered by the British secret services and the American CIA. The plans for the coup were made in utter secrecy in the Spring of 1953 at the British military Headquarters in Nicosia. Cyprus was a British colony at the time. The American role in Iran traumatized the Iranian psyche and was to weigh heavily on Iranian politics since then.

By the Fall of 1978, Iran entered a revolutionary turmoil as daily mass demonstrations, peaceful ones, demanded the ouster of the Shah and the return

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of Khomeini from exile, he was in Paris at the time. The Shah's regime was doomed from the moment his security apparatus started shooting and killing demonstrators. The Shi'a custom of 40<sup>th</sup> day memorial services for those killed earlier, provided the rhythm of the revolution as huge crowds attended these ceremonies that turned into anti-Shah demonstrations.

This past Monday, an enormous crowd, close to one million, gathered at Tehran's Azadi (Freedom) Square to protest the official results of last Friday's elections that gave President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a landslide victory over his opponent Mir Hossein Mussavi. It was a political earthquake. The opposition was convinced that only through widespread fraud could Ahmadinejad win a two to one victory. The Islamic regime's security forces opened fire and several demonstrators were killed. The question everyone is asking is whether we are witnessing a repetition of the mass protest movement that toppled the Shah 30 years earlier. There is no easy answer to this question as a positive answer would mean that we are faced with the dynamic of another revolution, *against* the Islamic revolutionary regime this time. This is theocratic regime led by Khomeini's successor, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the true holder of power in the country.

The situation in Iran does resemble a cauldron, but there is no way to predict the course of events as both the Islamic regime and the opposition are confronted with enormous dilemmas. The first question that needs to be answered is whether the opposition represents a reform movement or, since Monday's mass rally, the sheer number of protestors transformed it into a revolutionary force bent to overthrowing the Islamic government. There is a very important point to consider in this regard. The leader of the protest movement who challenged Ahmadinejad and galvanized the masses, in urban centers especially, is not someone who can be considered an opponent of the Islamic character of the regime. Mir Hossein Mussavi is among the dedicated leaders of the Islamic revolution and served it with commitment as Prime Minister from 1981-1989. In fact during his tenure as Premier, the regime faced the challenge of the Mujahedin Khalq, an Islamo-Marxist opposition group that had a fall out with

Khomeini and started a violent campaign against his regime. Among others, the Mujahedin assassinated a key figure of the revolution, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, whose close associate was Moussavi. With Khomeini's blessings, a resolute Premier Mussavi, confronted ruthlessly the Mujahedin Khalq and neutralized their role in Iran. In other words, Mussavi, a true child of the Islamic revolution, does not aim at overthrowing the Islamic regime but at reforming it. In this regard, on Tuesday, the *New York Times* quoted a young demonstrator, Ali Reza: "These people are not seeking a revolution. We don't want this regime to fall. We want our voices to be counted, because we want reforms, we want kindness, we want friendship with the world."

This, sums up what the anti-Ahmadinejad protests are about. Over 65% of the Iranian population is under 30 years old, meaning that they were born after the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979. They are faced with a deteriorating economic situation, students have no future, and above all they are yearning for more freedom as they are chafing under the austere and repressive rule of the theocratic regime. Moreover, women, who played a very important role in this protest movement, are also yearning for a more open society that will allow them to escape the "morality police" roaming the streets and harassing them if their hair is not completely covered by a scarf, if they wear lipstick, if they hold hands with their boy friend. This younger generation also wants to see Iran change its role in the international arena. They are tired of the continuous confrontation with the West and are willing to open a dialogue with the United States, based however, as President Obama has stated, on mutual respect. We are dealing, therefore, with a reform movement, as things stand now. For no-one can predict the course of events if mass protests continue and if the regime employs brute force, as it is capable of doing, to quell the protests. The question here is whether Mir Hossein Mussavi can harness the mass protests and prevent the escalation of violence or whether the protesters will be ahead of their leader. The answer is unclear as it is also unclear whether the reform movement can be sustained in the form of mass protests or whether it will fizzle away. But now the protesters

have a new tool they did not possess a few years ago. They are using the internet, twitter, you tube, face book, cell phones to organize, something that is difficult for the regime to control.

The Islamic regime is also faced with a dire dilemma, more dire perhaps than the reform movement. Up to the present, the Islamic regime of Iran represented itself as the expression and symbol of a true Islamic revolution that was entitled to govern precisely because the people of Iran legitimized its rule that is based on Shi'a precepts of Islamic government. Now the regime is confronted with the dilemma: To put down the mass protests with brute force or accept that there was mass voting fraud and seek a way out by accommodating the reformists. If the Supreme Leader and the clerical establishment resort to brute force, and given the enormous support for Mussavi and the reform movement, then they will risk losing their greatest asset: Their legitimacy at home and their appeal to the rest of the Muslim and Arab world as an alternative form of government to existing regimes, secular, semi-secular and pro-American. This grave risk is understood by at least some elements of the clerical establishment. They include former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a close Khomeini associate, who sided with Mussavi and the reformers.

Whether there is going to be a serious split among the clerical rulers remains to be seen. There are signs that some senior clerics are sensing that the very foundation of the Islamic Republic is at stake and they might be willing to abandon Ahmadinejad. If this happens, we might witness an Iranian form of "perestroika." Consequently, if the Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Guardian's Council accede to Mussavi's demands for a new election, the Islamic regime will open the way to a different Iran, Islamic oriented, but more tolerant domestically and more willing to engage the West and the United States internationally. At the same time, however, if Ayatollah Khamenei retreats and accepts the reformers demands, then the power monopoly of the fundamentalist clergy will suffer an irreversible blow. This would be unacceptable to the diehard clerics of the Islamic revolution and several of the agencies they control, including the army, the

powerful Revolutionary Guards and the *Basij*, the dreaded militia. They are the ones who have been roaming the streets on motorbikes beating up and intimidating protesters. Their tactics remind many Iranians of similar tactics of the Shah's security agencies and his dreaded SAVAK.

All this does not mean that the Islamic regime under Khamenei and Ahmadinejad does not have popular support, far from that. But it appears that the regime panicked as it feared that it might be overwhelmed by the protest vote and rushed to declare the landslide "victory" by Ahmadinejad. Apparently this tactic backfired and now the Islamic regime is faced with these painful dilemmas. It's concession that the Guardians' Council will deliberate over the charges of electoral fraud and will consider limited recounting of the vote, might mean that the top clerical leadership under Khamenei has realized what is at stake. But it might also mean that the regime is playing for time, hoping that the mass protests will die down. On its part, the opposition considers these moves, the ruling by the Guardian Council expected in ten days, a whitewash. That is why the mass protests have not abated.

As for the United States, President Obama struck the right tone in his cautious statements on Monday and Tuesday expressing sympathy for the reformers and their demands for their vote to be counted but also avoiding explicit condemnation of the Islamic regime. For had he denounced it, it would have provided the regime with the ideal excuse it is seeking: To brand the reformists as a tool of America. The painful memories of past American involvement in Iran would be used by the regime to discredit Mussavi and the reformist opposition. Moreover, the Obama administration is seeking to engage Iran with regard to its nuclear program so it can deter it from developing nuclear weapons. As in the past, American foreign policy is faced with its own Iran dilemma.

In the end, how this latest chapter of the Iran saga will be played out is not amenable to any meaningful prediction. One can only paraphrase what Churchill said about the Soviet Union: "[Iran] is a riddle, wrapped in mystery, inside an

enigma." That is why the question whether Iran is entering the post-Khomeini era and *what this could mean*, does not have an answer at this point.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Since the publication of this article over two months ago, mass protests in Iran have abated with the regime appearing to have gained the upper hand over the reform movement. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the regime has scored a decisive victory over the opposition movement. While the regime was able to suppress mass protests, it has done so at a considerable expense to its credibility and moral authority. The brutal methods employed by the government against protesters, were reminiscent of the methods used by the Shah to suppress opposition to his regime. The brutality of the Shah's secret police, known as SAVAK, was a contributing factor to the 1979 Islamic revolution. Now, several veterans of this revolution including some Ayatollahs, among them senior Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, have openly criticized the Ahmadinejad government as following the Shah's footsteps. Nothing can be more detrimental to the legitimacy of the Islamic regime than to be seen by a very substantial sector of society as being as oppressive as or even more oppressive than the Shah's. The fact that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei came down squarely on the side of Ahmadinejad and pronounced him President who won in "fair elections," has raised the stake for the Islamic establishment. By siding with Ahmadinejad and approving the crushing of the opposition by brute force, the Supreme Leader has raised questions over Ayatollah Khomeini's carefully crafted role in the constitution of the highest office of Supreme Leader known as vilayat-e faqih or the rule by the theologian jurist. This rule, a form of rule by a Muslim "philosopher king" representing God's will on earth, was supposed to be infallible. As such, this rule should be wise as well as one that stayed above the fray of politics and served as the ultimate arbiter in case of crisis. Above all, the rule of the Supreme Leader was to be one of justice. "Just rule" has been at the

epicenter of Shi'a history and doctrine as opposed to the "unjust rule" that the Shi'a faithful had to endure over the centuries.

By siding openly against the opposition and sanctioning the use of force that included the killing of protesters, mass arrests, torture and show-trials, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is viewed by many Iranians not as a just ruler but as the leader of a dictatorial regime. This strikes at the heart of the moral authority of the Islamic regime which is being openly questioned.

Already, veterans of the Islamic revolution that include two former presidents, Ayatollah Rafshanjani and Ayatollah Khatami along with other Ayatollahs including Ayatollah Montazeri, are casting doubt over the legitimacy of Supreme Leader Khamenei's rule. Indicative of the morass that the Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad are finding themselves in, is the fact that one of the accused in the show trials is none other than Saeed Hajjarian, one of the student protagonists who took over the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979 and held the American diplomats hostage for fifteen months. Ironically, the students who occupied the American Embassy were known as the "children of the Imam (Khomeini)" who followed the "path of the Imam," khat-e Imam. Now, one of these "children of the Imam," Saeed Hajjarian, who became one of the leaders of the reform movement, is accused for "crimes against the Islamic government." How this developing power struggle between two factions of the original Islamic revolution, the hard liners versus the more reform oriented, will be played out cannot be predicted.

On its part, the Obama administration has taken a solid stand in condemning the brutal suppression of the opposition and is considering, along with other western allies, a series of sanctions against Iran. These sanctions are contemplated with regard to Iran's nuclear program and ambition to become a nuclear power, not unlike Pakistan. This prospect, an Iran possessing an atomic bomb, is quite sobering and has forced the Obama administration not to close the window of future contacts with Iran. This delicate diplomatic dance by Washington aims at

finding a way out of the current impasse so that Iran does not proceed to produce a nuclear bomb. This demands a very fine balancing act which also requires the cooperation of Russia and China, by no means an easy task.

In the final analysis, both the domestic situation in Iran as well as its drive to become a nuclear power are not amenable to making predictions to what the future holds in this strategically located country. Whatever the future course of events might be, one thing is certain. Iran was and remains a pivotal country whose actions affect not just regional balances but have repercussions far beyond the Persian Gulf.