



Iran's Secular Revolution

By Assad Homayoun

ABSTRACT

Iran's first national experiment with modernity was the constitutional revolution of 1906. The Iranian experimentations of the past one hundred years symbolize the deep divide between the two paradigms of modernity and the traditions of the distant past. In the intervening years, Iran was the only nation in history that underwent a religious revolution as yet another experiment with modernity. Above all, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a costly experiment in embracing the distant past and in the total denial of progress and modernity. In this article, Dr. Assad Homayoun, a prominent opposition leader, discusses the failure of the Islamic government and emergence of the secular movement as the last chapter in a long experimentation toward institutionalizing modernity in Iran and its regional consequences. Just as the Islamic revolution started the domino effect of spreading fundamentalism throughout the region, Iran's secular movement may be the beginning of a process toward the region's inevitable historical destiny: modernity, and the respect for a *free* and *thinking* human being.

outside of the government but with enormous potential. All three have been facing off and competing fiercely in the political arena in the past few years.

The first camp consists of the fundamentalist (mostly) clerical ruling clique, which has shown every indication that it is intent on clinging to power at any cost. The second camp consists of the religiously-inclined reformists who would like to bring about some limited reforms in order to moderate the rule of the Islamic Republic and make it more acceptable to the people, in the hope of prolonging its survival. The third is the emerging coalition of secular, liberal nationalist forces that believe in the clear separation of religion and state and that espouse democratic ideals.

Very soon after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, many Iranians came to recognize the self-serving nature of the then emerging

The political forces in Iran are now divided into three distinct groups. Two of these are established political camps within the framework of the Islamic government, and one is an emerging political force



A student protester during a clash on July 13, 1999. A clash that started after a peaceful student demonstration was bloodily suppressed and plain-cloth Basiji Guards stormed the Tehran University dormitory and killed three students.

AP/Wide World Photos

autocratic religious clique and the dangers it posed to the well-being of the people and the prosperity—even the survival—of the country. From those very early days, many individuals as well as groups have opposed, resisted,

order to win incremental steps toward the re-establishment of a civil society.

During his three years in office, Mr. Khatami has not been able to deliver on his promise. He has also failed to implement economic reforms and to liberalize political participation. The exception for a while was the press. For a few months, the print media's shackles were removed, and it flowered. However, that too was short lived.

The highlights of Mr. Khatami's tenure in office can be summarized as follows: a deepening of the economic crisis; a marked increase in political assassinations; persecution and imprisonment of religious minorities; cruel and bloody suppression of student demonstrators demanding freedom and democracy; mass arrests of reporters and publishers; and the closing down of 25 opposition newspapers. During this time, tension and competition between the "fundamentalist" camp and the "reformist" camp reached a new high. In retrospect, this was

When the peaceful student demonstrations were bloodily suppressed in the summer of 1999, Mr. Khatami sided with the rest of the reactionary fundamentalists in denigrating the student movement.

and struggled—albeit thus far unsuccessfully—against the regime.

In the past four years, passive opposition as well as active political struggle against the clerical regime has intensified both within Iran, mostly spearheaded by the youth, and abroad, by Iranians living overseas. The Iranian people have made every effort to bring about change through the ballot box. In general, they are still hopeful that they can

more a tactical power struggle than a strategic showdown. When the peaceful student demonstrations, first at Tehran University and later at Tabriz University, were brutally and bloodily suppressed in the summer of 1999, Mr. Khatami sided with the rest of the reactionary fundamentalists in denouncing and denigrating the student movement. It is important to note that one of the main reasons for the demonstrations was to support the ideals that Mr. Khatami had publicly espoused and had promised to deliver on. The Third Force—disheartened, leaderless, without direction, but resolute in believing that it could affect change through peaceful means—chose to support reformists and Mr. Khatami's allies. Thus, in the parliamentary elections in February and April 2000, the Third Force again threw its support to the religious reformists, resulting in their overwhelming victory for the first time.

The reaction of the regime was expected. It tried in vain to get



A student with his face covered helps a friend who was overcome by tear gas fired by riot police at Tehran University Monday night, July 12, 1999. This was the first time that students and ordinary Iranians had taken to the streets in large numbers to challenge the powerful hard-liners. (AP/Wide World Photos)

effect change through peaceful means. The bulk of the opposition that is not affiliated with any political group—call them the Third or Secular Force—has emerged as the possible savior of the nation.

Lacking leadership to shape it into an effective political movement, the Third Force initially coalesced around the reformists. This resulted in the election, against all odds, of Mr. Khatami to the Presidency three years ago. Mr. Khatami, a political unknown who had pledged to respect the limited freedoms guaranteed under the Islamic constitution, was thrust—perhaps unknowingly—into the midst of the reformist movement. Mr. Khatami had promised a return to the rule of law, and this was enough for the Third Force and, indeed, the majority of the Iranian electorate to give him their full support. Even though the people had no part in the nomination process, they were willing to take their chances with a seemingly moderate candidate in



Highlights of Mr. Khatami's tenure in office:
 deepening of the **economic crisis**;
 marked increase in **political assassinations**;
persecution and imprisonment
 of religious minorities;
 mass **arrests** of reporters and publishers; and the
closing down of 25 opposition newspapers.

Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former arch-conservative president, elected to head the Parliament. The regime attempted to nullify the election results. A leading “reformist” strategist was shot and incapacitated, and many opposition newspapers were closed.

The Sixth Islamic *Majles* (Parliament) was inaugurated at the end of May 2000, with the reformists holding a majority of the seats, but few believe it can bring about any meaningful change. Absolute power rests with *Valie-Faquiab*, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. He has been anointed by God to interpret the religion. At his command are all the armed forces and the security forces. At his disposal are vast financial and economic resources, which are outside the control of the government. He controls the judiciary as well as the legislature. Therefore, the impotence of the Sixth *Majles* is obvious.

The first hurdle is the veto power of the omnipotent Guardian Council. No legislation can be contrary to its interpretation of Islamic laws—that is, contrary to the self-interest of the *mullahs* in power. The second problem is one of implementation. Who in government would have the power or the incentive to implement reform legislation? This is the reality in Iran at present. Hope and despair dogs every move of the opposition.

In summary, there are now three forces facing off in Iran. First is the ruling religious force headed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This group is very intransigent. It will not accept or implement any reforms. Nor will it compromise. It has actually developed into a cult or a sub-sect within Shiite Islam. This group believes that the tenets of Islam are paramount. Furthermore, it affirms that the Supreme Leader

is chosen by God as the guardian of the people and has the sole right to interpret the tenets of Islam. They place the Supreme Leader, and thereby his political camp, above the Islamic Constitution. Therefore, they contribute to and benefit from arbitrary interpretation of the constitutional laws. In so doing, they perpetuate the lawlessness of the present Iranian society.

The second group should be defined as the religious reformists headed by President Khatami who would like to bring about the rule of Islamic constitutional law as well as the implementation of some personal freedoms within an Islamic society. They hope, to some extent, to liberalize the system and humanize the society in order to ultimately preserve the Islamic Republic and theocratic system. The religious reformists have come to accept the fact that the Islamic regime has lost credibility both in Iran and abroad.

The religious reformists realize that unless Iran emerges from its present political and economic isolation, it will not gain the legitimacy to which the Iranian people rightfully aspire. Of course, there are those among the religious reformists who believe in more than superficial reforms. In all likelihood, there are also those who believe in secularism. However, their members are few among the elected representatives to the Sixth *Majles*, and they generally tend not to cross the line when they get to it, lest they share the same fate as Mr. Hajarian, the reporter who joined the religious reformist camp and later was shot. This is one of the reasons that the regime has been much more lenient with the religious reformists so far. The greater majority of those

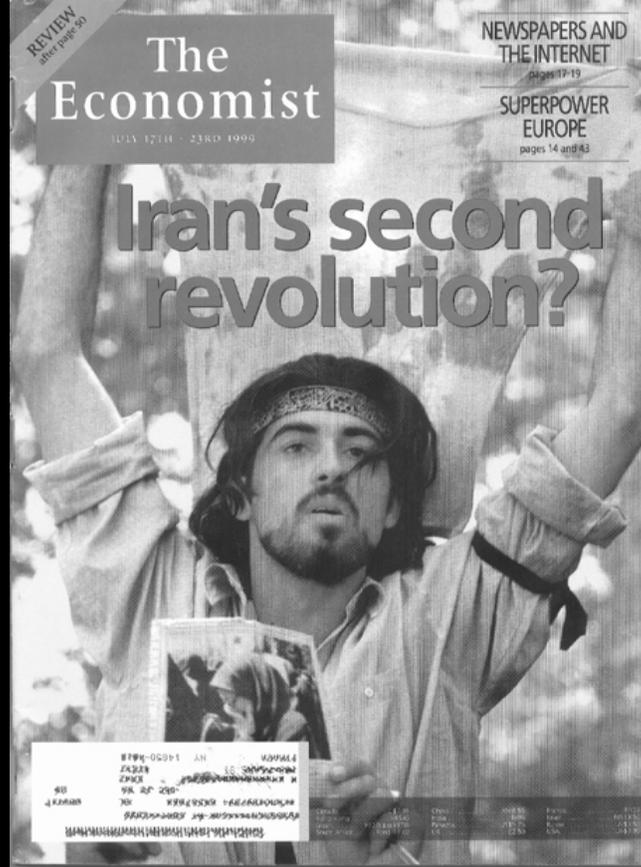
assassinated have been nationalists espousing secular ideals who dared to cross the line.

The third political group in Iran—the Third or the Secular Force—has been growing and is gaining momentum. The youth, women, students, and the silent majority (which is showing signs of restiveness) constitute this group. This movement has no ideology. Their main binding factor is a vision of an inclusive democratic society for all Iranians irrespective of their religion or political belief within the tenets of a liberal national patriotism. There is a deep awareness of the Iranian identity—that is, Iranian history and culture—and an unswerving belief in the separation of religion and government. Their motto is: “Iran for all Iranians.” They have resolved to send the mullahs back to the mosques so that a legitimate system of government based on democratic ideals can be established.

The effects of this movement will be felt not in the distant future but in the near future in Iran. It has already spread its roots within the armed forces and the security forces, including even the Revolutionary Guard and the *Basiji*, the trusted guards of the Ayatollah.

The Third Force has already unsettled the regime. All hopes are that this Force will be successful in forcing the regime from power.

The majority of the Iranian people represented by the Third Force have come to believe that as long as power is wielded by the clerics under *Velayate Faquih*, the Supreme Islamic Leader, there will be no change in the domestic or the foreign policy of Iran. This majority



Ahmad Batebi, a student at Tehran University, whose picture was featured on the cover of *The Economist* magazine, was sentenced to death for “disturbing the peace.” The news of his death sentence was publicized by the Iran Daneshjoo Organization. After worldwide attention was attracted to his case, the death sentence was reduced to 15 years imprisonment. According to a letter that Mr. Batebi has sent from the prison, he has been violently tortured during his captivity [www.iran-daneshjoo.org]. (Photo courtesy of *The Economist Newspaper, Inc.* Reprinted with permission. Further reproduction prohibited. www.economist.com)

from it. They have lived in the twentieth century but have been myopic to the speed and scope of change among nations. They are to some degree familiar with the new world that is changing with high speed due to new technology but have not realized that the global concept of time has been affected by these changes. Their concept of reform, change, and time is very similar to that of the fundamentalists—and therein lies their dilemma.

Most Iranians believe that the continued existence of the Islamic regime is a gradual death sentence for Iran as well as a real threat to the stability of the region. The Iranian people are aware that the continuation of the present state

of affairs is not only harmful to the economy, culture, history, and the well-being of the people but is also a genuine threat to the territorial integrity of Iran as well.

The greatest tragedy is that the biggest losers in Iran are the youth. They see no future because there is little future for them in the Islamic Republic. To them the regime is like a festering growth on the body politic which, if not removed, will cause the demise of the nation.

Presently in Iran, the youth, particularly the students, are the spokespersons of this secular movement and have the support of the people, including most of the four million Iranians living abroad. What this movement needs is organization, consolidation, and, most importantly, leadership. It needs a leadership capable of handling the

What the Secular Force needs is legitimization through international recognition.

believes: that the only solution is the establishment of a secular, democratic, and liberal nationalist government; that the struggle must continue until this goal is achieved; and that change should be brought about, preferably, through peaceful means and without recourse to violence.

Indeed, the Iranian people are thoroughly dissatisfied with the clerical regime. They wish to end the present reign of terror at any cost. Through patience, perseverance, and the support of the free world, they still hope to achieve this through non-violent means. If the ruling clerics do not succumb to the will of the people, another revolution will be inevitable. The supporters of the Third Force believe that by now the world should have come to recognize the evil nature of this clerical

responsibilities and willing to take the inherent risks. There are, without a doubt, Iranians—men and women—both inside and outside Iran, capable enough to assume this leadership. It is paramount to acknowledge that without leadership there can be no effective organization or direction and, therefore, very little possibility of success.

The Third Force is becoming stronger every day, due to, among other things, the technological revolution of this Age of Information. It is demanding an end to the self-serving, corrupt, incompetent *mullahs*

Because of Iran's geographical position as the link between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and because of its natural resources (which include its large, well educated population as well as its strong cultural heritage), it can play a very constructive or a very destructive role. In the past 50 years, it has played both roles very well.

It is time for the world's free press to heed the call of the Iranian people. The free press of the world should finally acknowledge the existence of the Third Force, which it has refused to even cover in

news stories, much less support through editorials.¹ Public recognition adds political force. The same is true for the national governments of the world. The Iranian people need not financial or covert assistance but rather the unconditional moral and political support of the world democratic community—particularly that of the American people and the United States government—to face down the fundamentalist, terrorist-nurturing regime presently ruling Iran. What the Secular Force needs is legitimization through recognition. Both the press and the nations of the world now persist in ignoring the opposition to the government put forth by the Secular Force and portray President Khatami and religious reformists as the only source of change for Iran. Indeed, even the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, went so far as to say that President Khatami is “the only hope” for Iran.

Much in contrast to Mr. Fischer's assertion, the only solution for Iran is the replacement of the present corrupt, reactionary, sectarian system with a secular government that resolves to safeguard the rights of all the Iranian

citizens and devoted to domestic development and international cooperation. Iran needs stability and freedom to develop, and a stable Iran is crucial to the stability of the Middle East—and the Middle East to the world.

The peace dividend for Iran will mean prosperity, and the economic benefits for the West will be far greater than the present-day trade in armaments.

Notes:

1. There is one exception. In 1999, after three to five thousand people called the *Los Angeles Times* to complain about its not reporting on a massive protest by Iranians at the federal building in downtown Los Angeles, the newspaper regretted its lack of coverage in its leading paper editorial. Only then did it begin to cover the activities of the Third Force in Iran. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, is still silent on the issue of the Third Force.

A Fellow at the International Strategic Studies Association in Washington, D.C., Dr. Homayoun is the president of the Azadegan Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the cause of freedom in Iran.



Students flash the victory sign to Basiji guards during a clash in Tehran, July 1999.
AP/Wide World Photos

The Iranian youth, particularly the students, are the spokespersons of this secular movement and have the support of the people, including most of the four million Iranians living abroad.

who have managed to turn a once wealthy, prosperous Iran into a pauper state within a very short period of time. The Third Force is demanding the establishment of a government that will consider all Iranians equal, regardless of their religion or political beliefs—a government in which they would have a voice in determining their own future.

In the twenty-first century, the Middle East has continued to be the political center of gravity and the powder keg of the world. Presently, it stretches from the Pamirs in the East to the Mediterranean in the West and from the Urals in the North to the Horn of Africa in the South. Its strategic importance has not diminished: it is still and will be a major source of the world's energy resources, for both oil and gas; it is the center of the largest arms race in the world at present; and it has some of the world's most complex and seemingly intractable ethnic problems and conflicts, even though it is the birthplace of three of the world's four major religions.

Predictably, the Middle East may be the arena for the next round of Russo-Sino-American conflict. Iran is situated strategically in the Middle East. It shares borders with 15 countries of the region.