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Watershed in Iran: New media images of freedom have overwhelmed fear of the regime

No thanks to President Obama

[By Dr. Assad Homayoun](#)

The following special report by Assad Homayoun, a member of [WorldTribune.com's Advisory Board](#), is based on a report for Defense & Foreign Affairs, published by Global Information System.

Spanish thinker Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) said: "Rule is the normal exercise of power, it should never rest on force." This is more true today, a half-century after his death, in this age of Blackberry and Twitter. To use an analogy, it can be said that theocrats have never ruled Iran; rather, they have controlled it by brute force almost from day one.

In the past three decades, Iranians repeatedly tried to find an opportunity to regain their fundamental freedoms. In 1999, more than 10,000 students of universities in Tehran and Tabriz dared to challenge the clerical government, but were suppressed through violent action which resulted in several students being killed and large numbers incarcerated. The students did pose a serious threat to the administration: they were focused, frustrated, and audacious to the extent of carrying placards with the slogan "death to Khamene'i". A sizeable number of the general public supported the students, but there were three reasons why the movement failed.

First, the ruling clerics were still united at the time;

Second, the protestors lacked leadership;

Third, the protestors relied on the support of “reformist” President Mohammed Khatami (who served as President from Aug. 2, 1997, to Aug. 3, 2005), but when the chips were down, the President abandoned the students, sided with the “Supreme Leader”, “Ayatollah” Ali Hoseini-Khamene‘i, and the student uprising was brutally suppressed.

The situation today is very different. The clerical administration openly rigged the June 12, 2009, presidential elections with the blessing of the Supreme Leader, who sided with incumbent President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. The Iranian people, as well as others, believe that the huge fraud robbed the people of their votes. It is not that electoral manipulation was new to post-revolution Iran, but on this occasion there was a sense that there was a real choice being offered to voters.

It is ironic that the fissures appear in the clerical structure at a time when global conditions have, in many ways, rewarded it. The U.S.’ ability to apply [military](#) and diplomatic pressure on Iran diminished dramatically with the collapse of Washington’s ability to support its friends in the region, such as Georgia and Azerbaijan. This brought a commensurate rise in the ability of Russia to assist the clerics with the result that Iran now has, to a significant degree, access to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

That, along with the removal by U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) of a military threat to the clerics, has meant that the clerical administration has been able to focus on domestic control, and even then with the prospect that Russia would forcibly help Iran break the U.S.-EU embargoes against it so that it could sell its energy more openly on the world market, through Russian-controlled pipelines. Indeed, should U.S. [President Obama](#)

continue to pursue “negotiations” with the Iranian clerics, he should be unsurprised if such openings yield no delay in the clerics’ pursuit of nuclear weapons or their support for radical, anti-Western movements.

Ahmadinejad has already made it abundantly clear that he neither fears the U.S., nor will move one millimeter to accommodate the [Obama Administration](#). The U.S., as far as Tehran is concerned, has lost its teeth, and the clerics have reverted to raising the old bogey: that Britain is behind all its ills.

But people have taken to the streets of Tehran and other cities in protest and have challenged the legitimacy of the administration. Determined women and men, young and old, from all walks of life, have continued the protests and demonstrations despite the violence perpetrated against them by special security forces and the Basij.

A number of factors make this uprising different from the one in 1999:

- The economic, political, and social situations in Iran have not improved significantly for years, perhaps, in real terms, since the 1979 revolution;
- There seems to be a genuine consensus that the system is incapable of reform. The suppression of choice in the June 12 election seemed to confirm that any hint of reform was unwelcome within the clerical leadership;
- Those elements of society, largely in urban areas, who have become frustrated are persevering in their opposition to the clerics, despite the threat of violent suppression and despite the real lack of support from the outside world. In the past, protest was quickly suppressed;
- New means of instantaneous communications have helped spread the social and political messages of the opposition to the world;
- For the first time, the unity of the ruling clerics has been publicly fractured. Major differences of opinion have surfaced between several ayatollahs. Powerful clerical figures such as Hashemi Rafsanjani, Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, Ayatollah Yousef Sanei, and Ayatollah Javadi Ameli, have recently openly criticized the government for rigging the elections, and for its dictatorial actions;
- Despite the lack of formal international pressure, world [public opinion](#) has largely — as expressed by the open media — changed in favor of the anti-clerical movement of the Iranian people;
- And this time, the opposition movement does have a weak and rather dark record of leadership in the person of Mir Hossein Mousavi. He may not be the ideal candidate or a charismatic person, and he may not wish to end the Islamic Republic, but he has emerged as the right person at the right time and place. He has the right credentials for what needs to be accomplished at this time, and could be a credible bridge from theocratic autocracy to democracy. There are many variables, however, as to how the situation could unfold, where Mousavi really stands, and how he could play his role in this decisive time.

Today, it seems the only real support for Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad comes from the [Presidential](#) Guard and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: Pásdárán). The fissure in the clerical ruling structure has precipitated a rift within the IRGC. Without the prospect that the clerical leadership can control the IRGC, the [police](#) and security forces would be neutralized. Should the unrest continue, and the pressures intensify, the result could be the end of theocratic government in Iran. This would undoubtedly initiate a new era of peace and stability in the region.

Significantly, the Iranian opposition does not need any significant physical or financial help from abroad, except the encouraging support of the [international community](#). Despite claims by Khamene'i and Ahmadinejad that the opposition movement in Iran was created, financed, and directed by foreign intelligence services, what is striking about the internal situation in Iran is that the actual election process — which the government of Iran could not ignore, given its

attempts to create a Potemkin Village of legitimacy of controlled elections over the years — raised the hope of change. This may have been because of the changes taking place in the international community itself, because of the mounting frustrations with the internal conditions, or because of the appearance of a candidate — in Mousavi — who gave voters the belief that Iran had matured beyond fundamentalist, revolutionary suffering.

Significantly, the 30 years of suppression have, in the light of global trends, become inadequate to control the Iranian public, which has gained access to the imagery of prosperity, change, and hope. It is not surprising that this imagery has been most strongly received in Iran's urban areas. That is where education, and access to technology, have created a receptive audience.

It is not surprising that the government's security forces have forcibly suppressed much of the street protest, since the announcement of the election results on June 13. What has been striking, however, is that many elements in Iranian have shed the element of fear. As a result, unless the government is prepared to create a bloodbath, the people are unlikely to give up and will continue their opposition to the clerics. Significantly, the more that the administration forcibly suppresses opposition, the more that it loses legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people and international observers. Thus, the situation will never be the same again in Iran.

The challenge, then, for the ruling clerics is not Washington, or even London, but the great mass of Iranians who have glimpsed an open sky and may not rest until the entire horizon is clear. The question is how long now will it take for Iranians to change their own situation, and how much will the clerics attempt to suppress them by force in the process.

To paraphrase the story of Mohammad Tughlak, the despotic Sultan of Delhi in the 14th Century as told in *Crowds and Power* by Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti, the Sultan had to keep up endless rounds of suppression of the ever-increasing riots of the people. He asked his historian and advisor, Zia Barani, who was Persian by origin, what he would recommend to quell the masses. The historian replied: "In some cases, there are remedies even for serious diseases of a political body. I would recommend the ruler leave for an extended hunting and pleasure trip and leave the business of state to a wise wazir with the ability to cure social and political problems. But some diseases are terminal and have no remedy. In that case nothing can be done and the government will surely die."

Such is the status of present-day theocratic Iran.

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