

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

The Nation

The Battle for Iran

Nader Hashem

1/14/2010

Are we witnessing the final days of the Islamic Republic of Iran? Judging from mainstream press coverage, it certainly seems so. Reacting to the street protests that rocked Iran after the death of the dissident Grand Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri in late December, veteran Iran observer Robin Wright asked whether "it is time to start wondering out loud whether Iran's uprising could become one of those Berlin Wall moments." While this is a tempting thought, given its implications for US-Iran relations, an obituary for the Islamic Republic is premature. What is required now is less of a projection of our own biases and preferences onto Iranian politics and instead a more sober analysis of the internal balance of power and the strengths and weaknesses of the regime and its domestic opposition.

There is little doubt that Iran's clerical oligarchy has been severely stunned and badly bruised by events following the disputed June election. The regime has suffered a huge blow to its legitimacy, and its management of the crisis has made matters worse. At the elite and societal level, unprecedented dissent and opposition have emerged as a confused regime increases state-sanctioned violence and begins a slow drift toward hard authoritarianism/semi-totalitarianism. However, despite this body blow, we are still a long way from witnessing the demise of the Islamic Republic.

Iran is a rentier state, which means it pays its bills by the sale of oil rather than through taxation. This gives the regime a significant degree of autonomy from society and immunizes it from societal pressure. This system also fuels an extensive patron-client network that allows the

regime to buy the allegiance of millions of people whose livelihood is tied to its survival. The regime also retains ideological support in rural and poorer areas of the country, where more pious segments of the population are dependent on state-controlled media, with limited access to the Internet or satellite TV.

Furthermore, there exists a loyal group of hard-core devotees who have internalized the regime's core propaganda line, to wit: recent street protests are foreign-funded and orchestrated; Iran's domestic problems are caused by the machinations of the United States and Israel; and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is God's representative on earth. Exact figures on the size of this core group of ideological supporters are difficult to ascertain, but they are substantial in number, and many are willing to lay down their lives for the Supreme Leader if called upon.

Finally, the Islamic Republic retains solid control of key institutions that pertain to the use of violence, the administration of justice and economic production. There is little evidence that this control has weakened. However, there are deep divisions among conservatives, many of whom despise President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for his economic mismanagement and reckless foreign policy. Moderate conservatives are also upset at the severity of the human rights crackdown, and a recent parliamentary investigation has blamed the notorious public prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi for overseeing the abuse of detainees at Kahrizak prison. He might be sacrificed in a gesture to the opposition, but given his close ties to the Supreme Leader, this is far from certain.

The Green opposition draws its support from Iran's sizable middle and educated classes, with overwhelming support among intellectuals, students, women's groups and especially youth, who constitute two-thirds of the population. While the opposition emerged as a broad and loose coalition angered by a stolen election, it has steadily grown and expanded its class and geographical base and, most important, its political demands. Ahmadinejad's "coup d'état government" (as it is called by the opposition) is no longer the target of the protests; the Supreme Leader and clerical authoritarianism are. The relationship between the leadership and its supporters is tenuous and evolving. Protests are organized at the grassroots level without any coordination from above, and it remains to be seen if the Green Movement can maintain its discipline in the streets as the regime intensifies its crackdown. After the late December protests, there was considerable concern that people were engaging in random acts of violence, tarnishing a nonviolent movement and giving the regime an excuse to crack down. In an open letter in early January, the veteran opposition leader Ezzatollah Sahabi spoke to this point, warning the opposition about the dangers of a slide into "radicalism and violence."

The Green Movement's biggest asset is that it has already won an overwhelming ideological victory against the regime. In the realm of political ideas, the battle is over and Iran's clerical oligarchs know it--liberal democratic ideas have triumphed. Today the guardians of the Islamic Republic cannot tolerate an open debate or exchange of ideas about events of the past six months or more broadly about Iran's human rights and political record over the past thirty years. Nothing terrifies this regime more. An abstract public discussion about Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's theory of political rule, *velayat-e faqih* (the rule of the Islamic jurist), or even a consideration of the merits of democracy and secularism can land Iranians in prison. Censorship of newspapers, jamming of satellite television, blocking of Internet sites and, most revealing, the mass arrest of almost every leading Iranian pro-democracy and human rights activist, many of them journalists,

speaks to the extreme paranoia of the Islamic Republic and its desire to prevent its citizens from getting access to information and dissenting points of view. Among Iranian expatriates, a public defense of clerical rule in Iran is unthinkable, not because the meeting would be disrupted (as sometimes happens) but because support for the clerical status quo in Iran is marginal when free debate is allowed.

The roots of this important ideological victory can be traced to the rise of the reform movement in the 1990s. It was during this period that Iranian political culture experienced a transformation, primarily because of the work of the country's religious intellectuals. The basic principles of liberal democracy and an indigenous understanding of "Islamic secularism" emerged and sank deep roots. This phenomenon underpins and informs the Green Movement today and has been recently chronicled in two excellent books, Mehran Kamrava's *Iran's Intellectual Revolution* and Farhang Rajaee's *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran*.

The struggle in Iran is akin to a boxing match between a slow-footed, unintelligent and arrogant heavyweight and a more agile, sophisticated and increasingly confident lightweight. The global audience overwhelmingly favors the underdog. Round One is over, and the weaker opponent has defied the odds not only by surviving; the lightweight has demonstrated prowess by striking several important blows that have disoriented and shaken the confidence of its more powerful adversary. Round Two has only just begun, and this championship bout is far from over.