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Requiem for a revolution

By Pepe Escobar

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PARIS - It was the Tehran spring. It was dreamed as a remix of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In the end, the Tehran wall didn't fall.

Beyond the blood, sweat and tears; the presidential election - stolen or not; the green revolution - legitimate or a foreign spy operation, as the regime insists; beyond losing candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, re-elected President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; what really happened?

What happened was the cementing of a dictatorship by the mullahtariat supported by the military. The world, the Western world especially, will still have to live and deal with Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and an ultra right-wing faction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) for years to come. So it's essential to understand where these "ultras" are coming from.

An iron-clad cast

The key man to watch is Major General Mohammad-Ali Jafari. In 2006, he became the IRGC's top commander. At the time he was already thinking in terms of the enemy within, not an external enemy. He was actively working on how to prevent a velvet revolution.

It's essential to remember that only a few days before the election, Brigadier General Yadollah Javani - the IRGC's political director - was already accusing Mousavi of starting a "green revolution". He said the Guards "will suffocate it before it is even born".

The IRGC has always been about repression. They literally killed - or supported the killing of - all secular political groups in Iran during the 1980s, especially from the left. After the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, died in 1989 they split into two sides. One side thought Iran needed a (slight) opening; they were afraid of a popular counter-revolution. Today, they are mostly reformist leaders or reform sympathizers.

The other side was, and remains, ultra-conservative. They include the already mentioned Jafari and Javani, as well as Ahmadinejad and his current Minister of Interior, Sadegh

Mahsouli, the man who oversaw the election.

The religious strand runs parallel and overlaps with the military strand - this is always about a military dictatorship of the mullahtariat. So one must refer to the Hojjatiyeh, an ultra-sectarian group founded in the 1950s. Khomeini banned them in 1983. But they were back in force during the 1990s. Their spiritual leader is Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, known as "the crocodile" in Iran. Two weeks before the elections, Yazdi issued a fatwa legitimizing any means necessary to keep Ahmadinejad in power.

That was the green light to steal the elections. It's essential to remember that Ahmadinejad replaced no less than 10,000 key government bureaucrats with his cronies in these past four years. These people were in charge of the maze of official organizations involved in the election and the vote counting.

Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi believes that Iran's supreme leader is chosen by Allah - when Allah tells the 86 members of the Council of Experts to find the leader. That's how Khamenei was "found" in 1989 - even though he was (and remains) a minor scholar, and never a *marja* (source of imitation). What Yazdi wants is an *oukoumat islami* - a hardline Islamic government sanctioned by none other than Allah.

Who are the devout disciples of Yazdi? Well, a lot of the current key players, starting with Ahmadinejad. Then his Intelligence Minister, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejehei; Ahmadinejad's top counselor, Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh; Saeed Jalili, the head of the National Security Council and now chief nuclear negotiator; many of the top IRGC commanders; the Basiji paramilitary militia, starting with their leader, Hassan Taeb, down to their lumpen proletariat millions. And of course the Iranian judiciary system.

Now, these ultras are in the process of smashing the old, first-generation leaders of the revolution, like former president and pistachio king Hashemi Rafsanjani. The IRGC are now taking over the bulk of Iran's economy. It's a monopoly. Rafsanjani is a very wily and well-connected billionaire. The IRGC as a business conglomerate doesn't want any competition.

This will be an even more repressive, hardcore Islamic government - wave bye bye to the republic. Officially, this is a country that defines itself as the Islamic Republic of Iran. The loss of the republic is one of the key reasons behind the street protests.

Allah, of course, still has to choose the next supreme leader. Khamenei is ill. Mojtaba Khamenei, his mysterious but very powerful son, is behind the ultras, but does not have what it takes to become a leader. And Rafsanjani is the head of the Council of Experts, which actually chooses the leader under the auspices of Allah. Rafsanjani is trying to conduct his own mini-revolution in the holy city of Qom going against Khamenei. The ultras will try everything to squash him. This is a bitter war at the very top of the regime. The ultras want Yazdi, or one of his proteges, as the next supreme leader.

Smells like a revolutionary rose

If this military dictatorship of the mullahtariat continues to appease its working-class support base with a little redistribution of oil revenues, they can stay in power for a long time.

The West may try to boycott them - but not Russia and China, as both made it clear in no time. Both are the driving force of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which

Iran is an observer and sooner, rather than later, will be a member. Iran's oil and gas are absolutely crucial to Europe - not to mention Asia. Nobody's going to embargo Iran's oil exports. So the military dictatorship of the mullahtariat will be able to repress and suppress whatever comes its way, using or not using Shi'ite eschatology to justify it.

There are echoes of the former Soviet Union in all of this. But what happened in the streets is more like Prague 1968 - and not the turbulence before the death of communism in 1989. In the end, the revolution was not YouTubed and Twittered simply because there was no revolution. The army - the IRGC - didn't support the people. And the bazaari merchants and the oil and gas industry workers didn't go on strike.

People were angry because they felt their vote had been stolen: there was nothing ideological about that. When they took to the streets they made clear that they wanted a better economy, less unemployment, a less stifling regime, a little more freedom of speech and of dress for women, less fiery rhetoric from Ahmadinejad, in sum, a better life. But on the other side of the spectrum there were the millions of pious Basiji - who are very happy with the meager and shabby existence the revolution grants them and who remain deeply, deeply alienated from Western culture.

This doesn't mean this was a Gucci, YouTube, Twitter uprising of the petit-bourgeoisie. It's easy to fall into this temptation as the people in the streets of Tehran were supported by the West en masse. But to believe that Iran's national interest and the aspirations of the excluded Iranian masses will be defended by this new military dictatorship of the mullahtariat is to completely miss the point.

Yes, the ultras are paranoid. They know they're virtually encircled by the US military machine. They know about the George W Bush administration's US\$400 million deployed for regime change. They have exploited their fears to the fullest - blaming Western foreign powers and foreign media for everything. What they could not foresee was the force of a spontaneous movement. Iran's civil society counts on around 28,000 associations. But they are not strong and structured enough to anchor a protest movement. Iranian unions have been smashed. Mousavi was the vessel that channeled a lot of disparate, pent-up rage and frustration.

With or without him, the road will be long. From now on, civil disobedience will be key, from silent protests to strikes. The sound of "Allah-O Akbar" will be echoing from the rooftops for days and weeks and months. When Khamenei sided with Ahmadinejad, he shelved his cloak of supreme arbiter and turned into a gang leader. The social contract between millions of Iranians and the revolution was broken. In the long run, there will be blood, yes - and there will be resistance. Iran is a very sophisticated society. There can be no turning back. But it will be a long and winding road.

So in the end there was neither reform nor revolution. And then, all that tremendous drama, all the sound and fury was drowned by the death of the "no matter if you're black or white" man in the mirror. The West, transfixed, resuscitated the moonwalk. But as Irish poet William Butler Yeats said, "Let the Earth bear witness"; those that lived - and will continue to live - the dream of a better Iran should not and will not be forgotten.