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## Iran caught in a 10-year cycle

By Grace Nasri

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Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, major changes have emerged every 10 years in Iran. In 1979, the Iranian people, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, forced out the shah as the country shifted from a monarchy to a theocratic republic.

Ten years later, in 1989, the leader of the Islamic revolution passed away and was replaced by the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Ten years after that, in 1999, Iran was rocked by students protesting in support of more freedoms.

Now, exactly 10 years later, up to a million Iranians have taken to the streets after the June 12 election publicly questioning, "Where is my vote?" Despite the mass public protests, however, it is what is going on behind the scenes within the leadership that has the potential to evoke real change.

The 2,500-year-old country, which has a history of democratic movements, has passed through two revolutions in recent memory, the most recent of which is the basis for Iran's Islamic Republic. Today, however, there is a growing divide within the leadership between the reformists who want to lead Iran towards democracy, openness and freedom, and ultra-hardliners who want to take the country back centuries before the revolution, to the time of the Prophet Mohammad.

While both groups emerged out of the revolution, the hardliners - who claim their authority and legitimacy from the late Khomeini - seem actually to be going against the very principals of the revolution he led.

While Khomeini spoke about the power of the people and the legitimacy of Iran's leaders as given through the will of the people, hardline leaders such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi are working behind the scenes to guide Iran from its path towards democracy back to the time when Islam was first emerging.

In the early 1980s, Khomeini warned against radical leaders and cautioned that people in

power should remember where their legitimacy came from. He said at the time, "It is necessary for me to give some brotherly advice to the respectable future leader or council of leadership and sincerely remind them that in the religions of the book and in great Islam, leaders or the leader do not have any innate value and should not, God forbid, become afflicted with pride and arrogance."

The regime's crackdown in response to the protesters shows that the current Iranian leadership is not following the guidelines of the Islamic Republic's founder.

Many of the same individuals who helped lead the revolution are now working to take the country back to the time before the revolution - before even the monarchy - to the time when Islam was first emerging. These same leaders are believed to be working discretely to change the leadership of the Islamic Republic from a theocratic republic to a theocratic dictatorship.

Studying Iran's history reveals it is often what is out of the public eye that has the ability to evoke change within the country. The protests of 1999 garnered massive attention, but resulted in merely that. The outcome of recent protests against the re-election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad for a second four-year term remain unclear; but they have undoubtedly revealed a divide within the leadership and brought into question the legitimacy of not only the Ahmadinejad regime, but for the first time, the role of the supreme leader and the system itself.

It remains unknown, however, whether these public protests and the increasing and public division within the leadership will evoke a real change in the system.

Much of the future direction of Iran is dependent on the growing rift between two groups. One is led by former presidents Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, former presidential candidates Mir Hossain Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, and Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. The other side is led by Khamenei and firebrand Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and his hardline *hojjatieh* (a semi-clandestine, radically anti-Sunni organization).

Rafsanjani, who is currently the head of the Assembly of Experts - the only group that has the constitutional ability to remove the supreme leader from his position - was recently in the holy city of Qom leading a hushed meeting with the Assembly of Experts of which the subject of the meeting is believed to have been focused on the role of the *velayat-e faqhi*.

The *velayat-e faqhi*, a post held only in Iran, has come to be accepted as the supreme leadership held by a single religious leader. Many Iranian leaders, however, argue that the post was originally held by Khomeini, but that the position - as outlined by the constitution - does not specifically call for one leader. They go on to claim that Khomeini, as the founder of the Islamic revolution, held the post as a single man, but that the constitutional position could be interpreted as being allotted to a group of religious leaders in an attempt to move the country towards a more democratic system. Khomeini himself referred to the position as being filled by either one leader or a council of leaders.

This issue, which is now being debated within the leadership itself, has caused an unprecedented rift between the mullahs of Iran. Reformist leaders such as Rafsanjani, Khatami and Mousavi are believed to want to move the country towards a more democratic system and are reportedly calling for the position to be filled (as the current supreme leader is reportedly ill) by a group of religious leaders.

Khamenei and Yazdi - who runs a seminary in Qom - are calling for the position to continue to be filled by one person. They are also rumored to be working behind the scenes to shift Iran away from its movements toward democracy and its foundation as a republic, towards a hardline dictatorial Islamic theocracy. Many leaders in Yazdi's camp are believed to be grooming Khamenei's son Mojtaba, who was this month honored with the title of ayatollah, as Khamenei's successor.

Rafsanjani is well aware of this. During Friday prayers late last month, Rafsanjani said, "If the Islamic and republican sides of the revolution are not preserved, it means that we have forgotten the principles of the revolution." Rafsanjani went on to recall that his mentor, Khomeini, said that the "people's will" must be done, something Rafsanjani has accused the current regime of ignoring.

Yazdi, however, seems to want to do away with the republican nature of the regime, and some feel he has blatantly disregarded the will of the people. He has been quoted as saying, "If anyone insults the Islamic sanctities, Islam has permitted for his blood to be spilled, no court needed either;" and "It does not matter what the people think; they are ignorant sheep." Insiders claim he wants to radically transform the country and take it back to the time when Islam was first emerging. Yazdi goes much farther than the hardline leader of the Islamic revolution, to the extent that Khomeini actually banned Yazdi's *hojjatieh* group in 1983, saying "they cannot run even a bakery, let alone a country".

In 1990, a year after Khomeini's death and Khamenei's takeover as supreme leader, the group reportedly re-emerged and began advocating an Islamic regime in which the *velayat-e faqhi* was an unelected leader selected by god not elected by the people. It is this same hardline leader who is the spiritual leader of Ahmadinejad.

Freedoms enshrined in the constitution are these days being withheld from the people, suggesting a move away from the fundamentals of the Islamic revolution and towards an even more regressive form of government. For example, Article 24 of the Iranian constitution states: "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public." Yet the regime continues to censor the press and crack down on freedom of expression. Simply wearing green or chanting "Allah-o Akbar" can now lead to detention.

According to Article 25, "The inspection of letters and the failure to deliver them, the recording and disclosure of telephone conversations, the disclosure of telegraphic and telex communications, censorship, or the willful failure to transmit them, eavesdropping, and all forms of covert investigation are forbidden, except as provided by law." Yet, according to reports, the Nokia Siemens Networks sold to Tehran is now being used for exactly those purposes against the Iranian people.

In another example, Article 27 states: "Public gatherings and marches may be freely held, provided arms are not carried and that they are not detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam." But after the June 17 Friday prayers, tens of thousands of demonstrators were met with baton-wielding Basiji militia and riot police armed with tear gas.

Observers believe that Iran's hardline leaders, including Yazdi, Ali and Mojtaba Khamenei and their followers, are currently working behind closed doors to drag the Islamic Republic back to the 7th century, away from democracy and in the direction of an absolute theocracy.

The millions of Iranians who risked their lives to join protests and call for their rights are not enough to stop this alleged political shift. It is up to Iran's reformist leaders who have gained legitimacy from the Iranian people themselves.

Iran cannot afford to wait another 10 years.