

MULLING THE MULLAHS: PRELUDE TO THE NEXT IRANIAN REVOLUTION?

Jeremy Kinsman

In the turmoil that followed the Iranian election in June, “a million voices roared from the roofs at night in outrage against a corrupt and tyrannical regime,” writes Jeremy Kinsman in a piercing analysis that sees both parallels to and differences from the first Iranian revolution. This time, it is the mullahs who are entrenched in power, supported by the Revolutionary Guard. The Iranian theocracy has stifled dissent and trampled on women’s rights and now is staging show trials of opponents of the regime, who may include dissident clerics. “The crucial fact,” writes Kinsman, “is that millions believed they had been cheated of their votes.” Are the turbulent events of this summer a prelude to a second Iranian revolution, or will the crackdown stifle the voices of dissent?

Pendant la tourmente qui a suivi les élections iraniennes de juin, « un million de voix retentissaient chaque soir de tous les toits pour dénoncer un régime tyrannique et corrompu », écrit Jeremy Kinsman dans une pénétrante analyse des parallèles et différences entre ce mouvement et la première révolution iranienne. Aujourd’hui, ce sont les mollahs, soutenus par la Garde révolutionnaire, qui s’accrochent au pouvoir. Après avoir étouffé la dissidence et piétiné les droits des femmes, voici que la théocratie iranienne organise des mascarades de procès d’opposants. « Le fait capital, rappelle l’auteur, a été que des millions d’électeurs ont cru qu’on avait volé leur suffrage. » Ce tumultueux été annonce-t-il une seconde révolution, ou la répression parviendra-t-elle à museler les dissidents ?

Tehran, 1979: “*ALLAH-U-AKBAR!*” As many as a million voices yelled from the city’s roofs toward the dark night sky, “God is great!”

The detested shah had fled a national insurrection now led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been flown into a power vacuum from Paris after a 15-year forced exile. But the die-hard Imperial Guard tried still to put down the revolt, administering violent beatings to street demonstrators who had been gathering in vast crowds and hauling many off to prison.

Khomeini commanded Iranians instead to mount to the safety of their roofs to vent their outraged impatience for a corrupt and tyrannical regime to give way, by an appeal to the greatness of God’s justice. “*Allah-u-Akbar!*”

Within weeks the army capitulated to the people, and the Iranian Islamic Republic was born.

Tehran, 2009: “*ALLAH-U-AKBAR!*”

Again, a million voices roared from the roofs at night in outrage against a corrupt and tyrannical regime. Only

this time, invocations were in irony over the ruling clerics’ betrayal of God’s justice, which had been the motif of the republic’s creation 30 years earlier.

The immediate issue in June 2009 was the widely-held view in Tehran that the ruling clique of Islamic theocratic conservatives had deleted democracy from the Iranian Islamic Republic, by stealing the presidential election in a preventive state-led coup d’état. Three million protestors poured into Tehran’s streets, calling for justice over a stolen election, and for reform of their institutions.

The progressive subtraction of democracy from Iranian life had been proceeding for years. Iran’s elected president is actually subordinate to the country’s “supreme leader,” whose role is to safeguard the revolution of 1979, as guardian of divine law. Ayatollah Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had used his two decades as supreme leader to vest all real power in his hands and those of his conservative clerical allies via the security forces and court system they alone control.

Once the regime rebounded in surprise from within its bubble, it dispatched its Basij militia to put down the

protests. Demonstrators were beaten, killed and tortured. The clerics' prosecutors set up show trials of the principal reformers. The whole effect was resurrected from totalitarian darknesses of other places 70 to 80 years ago, with images of organized mobs of thugs, and showcased forced "confessions." But a difference is that today the world bears witness in real time.

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About the election results, there was no sure way to know the truth. Iran has no independent election commission. Opposition observers were pushed away from scrutiny of the transport and opening of ballot boxes and counting of votes, which is done by hand, making the swiftness of an announcement of a near-final tally all the more suspect. There were no exit polls allowed. The Guardian Council under the authority of the Supreme Leader met and pronounced the results official. There would be no recounts, indeed no transparency at all. Today, those who publicly deny the outcome risk prosecution and imprisonment.

The election campaign itself between the sitting president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his principal challenger, a former prime minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, had been surprisingly open and vibrant with candid televised debates that riveted public attention and spiked hopes for victory from the Mousavi camp. Polls showed a groundswell building in favour of change.

But could the polls and the reformers have overestimated the opposition's country-wide support, not recognizing that Ahmadinejad's populist, anti-corruption, anti-elitist, religiously conservative and nationalist, even xenophobic, campaign had deep resonance among traditionalist rural voters?

As several told me, "If Ahmadinejad had won in a second round by 52 to 48 percent, we could have believed it, but the first-round landslide of 63 percent declared almost immediately by the government? No way."

By most accounts, there is a core of about 20 percent of the electorate that is irreducibly conservative. In 2005, disappointment over the regime's ability

to block reform efforts of the previous president Mohammad Khatami, and the ruling clerics' power to reject candidacies of all but the clerically approved persuaded many other Iranians to sit the 2005 election out, which enabled Ahmadinejad to win an easy victory.

But this June, an increasingly energized Mousavi campaign overcame their apathy and Iranians turned out massively to vote — 85 percent of eligible voters.

Objective analyses by scholars at Harvard and Oxford have compared the 2009 results to 2005. In a third of the provinces, the official results would have required Ahmadinejad to have won all "conservative" votes as before, all former centrist ones, all new voters and up to 44 percent of formerly reformist votes. Analysts cite 50 cities, with 3 million votes, where the number of ballots recorded as cast exceeded the numbers of eligible voters.

The crucial fact is that millions believed they had been cheated of their votes. The conduct of the regime in the following days only confirmed the view that a coup d'état by the state itself had occurred.

How did Iran arrive at this crisis of self-belief, in counter-point to its historic revolution a generation ago? What will Iran become now?

Opinion from scholars, observers and citizen reformers inside Iran I have met with this summer does form a consensus: the ruling clerics, their presidential surrogate, Ahmadinejad, and their cadres of violent repressors have clubbed their way to a tactical and temporary victory, but their credibility has been reduced to the force of their clubs. The Supreme Leader's role as national arbitrator is compromised beyond repair. In the longer term, the regime has suffered a strategic defeat.

My contacts hold that the events of June represent a great victory for the country. They hold that Iran will never be the same — the crackdown cannot mask that increasing numbers of clerics, abashed by the excesses of the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad power grab, understand that Iran's deeper reality needs realignment with a venerable Persian history and culture of tolerance and Islamic moderation.

Such confidence about longer-term outcomes competes within the souls of Iranian reformers against the depression that shrouds the city of Tehran today. The super-violent crushing of the green-armed non-violent crowds of young and old, who surged into the streets in the millions in outrage and hope, has taken a psychological toll, though smaller protests continue nightly and the regime hangs warily in a state of crisis even after Ahmadinejad's inauguration.

Hardline clerics try to smear the protests as having been instigated by Iran's foreign enemies. Though the June turbulence was an entirely Iranian event, democrats everywhere did feel compelled by the eternally inspiring drama of people rising up en masse against harsh and repressive authority. The death of student Neda Agha Solyan was seen by millions on Youtube as a defining moment. We scrutinized her youthful face, as we scanned the faces of marchers for justice in the hope we too would have been among them had we been Iranian. Seeing the subsequent photos of



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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad receives officials at the presidency, in Tehran, in July. The Iranian regime tried to maintain an air of business as usual, while staging a crackdown on dissent, following waves of protest in the wake of the June elections.

shackled defendants who risked all and who are paying dearly — most of them will stand by their beliefs, despite duress and even torture — we wonder if we could endure such punishments.

Of course, many Iranian protesters also looked outward, and as is the case everywhere in a globalized world, cited inspiring precedents for their emphatically homegrown movement. Indeed, the crowds of middle-class housewives, students, professionals and ordinary citizens in the streets and on the roofs of Tehran this spring did recall the popular protests in Santiago, Chile, during another election two decades ago; there too a dictator had thought it was safely rigged, only to be turfed out by a determined public. There, the true results could not be suppressed. In Iran, alas, they could be.

Each side invoked the “velvet revolution” of Prague in 1989 — reformers

had done so to situate their belief in non-violent change, and the regime’s lackey prosecutors did so to falsely allege foreign manipulation. Historically, the circumstances are very different in that in 1989 Czechoslovaks and others in Eastern Europe turfed out totalitarian regimes kept in office to serve a foreign power — a situation that, if anything, more resembled Iran in 1979 than it does today.

But 1989’s spirit of hope for change is not misapplied. That forceful repression has for now gone against reformers is a cruel reminder that repressive regimes have learned better how to use force to smash hopes. They have “gamed” the “colour” revolutions of Belgrade, Kiev and Tbilisi to shut down networks for hand-held communications — the texting and Twitter that mobilized and directed the crowds in Tehran and large cities like Esfahan.

But while the well-ensconced military rulers of Myanmar can crush peaceful protest with indifference to world opinion, Iran is not such a hermetically sealed society, however its ruling clerics may wish it to be. Iran has always been part of the wider world throughout its venerable civilization going back 2500 years.

At different points of its long history, Persia has been both a great empire, and also a land overrun — by Greeks, Arabs, Turks and Mongols. In the 20th century the discovery of oil made Persia the object of acute desire to both Britain and Russia, as a central act in what became known as the Great Game. Early on, British interests won from the Qajar king access to Persian oil fields on sweetheart terms. They were subsequently reaffirmed by army strongman Reza Shah, who had seized the throne in 1925. Foreign exploitation of Iran’s oil

fields became a smouldering source of national resentment, as happened in Mexico, Venezuela, Algeria, Libya or Indonesia.

The Second World War led to joint British-Russian occupation of Iran, during which the British stage-managed the replacement of Reza Shah by his British-tutored teenage son Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, ostensibly because the father had bet on the Germans winning.

A shaky post-war parliamentary democracy stumbled toward insistence on nationalization of Iran's oil assets and gave parliamentary approval to popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh to proceed. But in 1953 he was brought down in coup engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency and MI6. The young and pliant shah, who had fled earlier to exile was put back on the throne, only this time without a parliamentary democracy. Iran entered into a period of US-backed authoritarian rule that lasted until the revolution of 1979.

In her autobiography, the Nobel Prize-winning human rights defender Shirin Ebadi describes the significance of the 1953 coup for Iranian identity. "For secular and religious Iranians, working class and wealthy alike, Mossadegh was far more than a populist statesman. To them, he was a nationalist hero."

By subverting his democratic election, the US and the UK had won a tactical Cold War victory but had sown the seeds of deep resentment. As Ebadi wrote, "The coup fed the sense that we were not masters of our own destiny." Iranian destiny became one of repression under the Shah and his ubiquitous secret police, the SAVAK, and ensured the revolution in 1979 was a widely supported popular venture — Islamic, nationalist, but also democratic. For many, it also had anti-American undercurrents.

Of these components, what remained in 2009? Was the June protest and uprising against authority

a counterrevolution, or an attempt to restore the original content of the 1979 revolution?

The revolution established a hybrid form of government that sought to blend theocracy with a broad measure of democracy. The constitution explicitly guarantees Iranians many basic human rights. But from the start, conservative clerics regarded such provisions as window dressing only. They resented the elected institutions and worked to reduce their authority in favour of direct rule by theocrats.

Iran's conservative clergy rallied fervent support from many of the country's Shia Muslims, especially among the poor. It was such fervent supporters who in November 1979 seized the US embassy and held its diplomatic personnel captive for over a year, with considerable traumatic impact on the US public. President Jimmy Carter's candidacy for re-election died in the desert with a failed hostage rescue attempt.

In September 1980, a harsher drama began for Iranians. Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, hungrily coveting the oil fields and Abadan refineries. The ensuing war was the longest of the 20th century, with hideous costs to Iranians.

Embittered US-Iranian relations were part of the background. While Henry Kissinger had quipped, "It's a pity they can't both lose," the US iron-

especially insofar as women and their roles were concerned. They had effectively taken over.

But by the mid-1990s, Iranians were chafing under their unrelieved reactionary rule. When 1997 brought the landslide election as president of a relatively liberal cleric, Mohammad Khatami, a spring thaw set in. For a brief time independent newspapers and publications flourished. Diversity of opinion was celebrated, except by conservative clerics.

However, it was a chimera. Though he would be re-elected to a second term, Khatami never really was in charge. Moreover, his overtures to the US to normalize relations — Iran had been very helpful in the pursuit of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 — were sabotaged by Bush's infamously fatuous "axis of evil" speech. The US invasion of Iraq accompanied by neo-conservative sabre-rattling against Iran put an end to Khatami's US *démarches*.

Before long, the conservatives had shut down independent media and smothered the emerging diversity of views in Parliament and elsewhere, imprisoning critical journalists.

Student demonstrations broke out in 1999 that Khatami was helpless or unwilling to support. In 2003, the regime put down with brutality another wave of student protests at Tehran

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ically sided with Saddam Hussein. To this day, Iranians believe the US gave Iraq satellite data the Iraqis then used to target deadly attacks, including with chemical weapons.

As millions died in a war that reduced the country to mourning, as well as great material hardship, conservative clerics had fitting circumstances to impose a radical Islamic regime of increasing moral austerity,

university campuses, imprisoning thousands of the protesters. It was while photographing their families outside Evin prison that the Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi was herself arrested. Kazemi was killed by her prison guards in circumstances that never became clear but that attracted enormous international attention.

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clerics, Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected to the presidency on a traditionalist, nationalist and populist platform, His anti-corruption stance won him favour, but it was often conflated with antagonism toward educated elites and professionals.

Iran had indeed become a divided country. Forty percent were living below the poverty line, to whom Ahmadinejad

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promised much in the way of welfare. But the middle class was wholly alienated from government. Clearly, a rural-urban split had emerged.

On religion, a form of culture war had emerged over day-to-day observance of the conservative mullahs' tedious rules about visible proprieties and the separation of the sexes, and the widely detested public disciplinary admonishment for petty infractions. Modern Iranian urban women resent the mullahs' rural view of suitable traditional roles. By the end of the '90s millions of educated women were alienated. A million women signed a petition to have women's rights under inheritance and property law restored.

Possibly most important was the fact that two-thirds of Iranians had been born since the 1979 revolution. Youth wanted more of what youth everywhere enjoys, especially a clearer look at a brighter future. The "martyrdom" of Iranian youth in the war against Iraq was a generation ago.

Ahmadinejad's economic policies were widely seen as disastrous, driving up inflation. His international role embarrassed educated Iranians, and notably his ignorant denials of the Holocaust as he mused publicly about the annihilation of Israel.

And yet, he is again Iran's president, to the disbelief of many millions of citizens. Signs his renewed tenure is

contested even from within the regime are multiple. Ironically, he was recently heavily criticized by religious conservatives for having appointed as vice-president a man who had spoken with tolerance of Israel. That is small comfort for reform opponents, but they note that several important clerics have withheld their support because of the tainted election and the harshness of

the crackdown, especially as it took the lives of the sons of prominent conservatives. Two ex-presidents and several major clerical figures stayed away from the inauguration and the various staged celebrations. In the holy city of Qom, a growing number of dissident clerics say outright that Ahmadinejad is an abomination.

Still, the ruling clique around Ayatollah Khamenei holds the whip hand through power over the police and security services, as well as the prosecutors and courts. A test of a repressive regime's capacity to crush protest has always been whether it could command its security forces to shoot fellow citizens. After more than 20 were killed on the streets of Tehran and an unknown number tortured or beaten to death in prison cells, the question appears to be moot. The regime can count on its Basij militia, basically true believers from poorer milieux who benefit from privileges in return for brutal handling of dissidents and protesters. Behind them are the 125,000 elite Revolutionary Guards whose alumnus Ahmadinejad holds the position that sustains the power and, not incidentally, the wealth of the regime's principals.

A few commentators like British Mideast expert Alistair Crooke argue that Ahmadinejad can re-energize the Islamist side of the revolution with his

anti-corruption campaign, which could turn the public against wealthy clerics like Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami, who supported Mousavi.

My contacts scoff: the bulk of people are too sophisticated to buy the near-farcical lies — that the shooting of Solayan was organized by the BBC, and the rest of the nonsense the show trials have put forward.

There is a chillingly eloquent irony involved. In reading the indictment against the accused citizen reformers in shackles, Deputy Prosecutor Abdolreza Mohebbati made the case clear that this by now paranoid regime sits squarely among the tyrants of our times. Charging that they sought "a soft overthrow and velvet coup adopting so-called civil methods," he identified as "arms of the velvet revolution" the women's movement, the human rights movement, the labour syndicate movement, non-governmental organizations and "civil-ethic" movements — in short, civil society, or in other words, the Iranian people.

There is a decisive confidence issue at stake and Ahmadinejad seems to have lost it from below.

On the other hand, the reform movement is not well organized. The regime has now locked up its principal thinkers and organizers.

Can the largely urban reformers and optimists actually reverse the subtraction of democracy? Millions of middle-class and professional Iranians have emigrated in the last 30 years because they couldn't stand the theocratic diktats from the power-hoarding mullahs in charge.

It is possible Tehran's marchers represent just a dispensable remnant for populist rulers convinced they can rely for support on tradition-bound rural Iran, and can tough it out without having to cater to calls for reform from citizens and elites who may be essential to Iran's future, but who can be kept in their box. But it sounds delusional.

Mousavi, who began the campaign as a figure more conservative than most of his supporters, has acquired considerable stature by a steadfast resistance to the takeover. His wife, Dr. Zahra Rahnavard, sneered at by Ahmadinejad in a TV debate, has mobilized the pride of millions of educated women — 60

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percent of university students today are women. Students in general are alienated, and on-line with the rest of the world. Along with middle-class and business milieux disgusted by Ahmadinejad, there are ample ingredients of a mass solidarity movement in waiting.

Even a regime in denial must know it is in crisis. The show trials going on and the campaign to implicate foreign embassies in Iranian protests demonstrate an extremist backlash of insecurity. It is possible that Ayatollah Khamenei will recognize a need to try to get back on middle ground — which would place Ahmadinejad in a very shaky position, even as he has been reinaugurated.

How the rest of the world plays the crisis is very important. This is not a regime for others to change.

President Barack Obama, who had made strategic engagement the theme of his own presidential campaign, aware of the baggage in US-Iranian relations, kept the rhetoric down.

His offers and efforts via secret communications to dialogue with Iran had unsettled the regime. Ahmadinejad relies on confrontation for nationalist support.

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For international affairs policymakers, the elephant in the room is still the Iranian nuclear program. The Natanz nuclear installation continues to add the numbers of gas centrifuges

needed to produce sufficient amounts of weapons-grade enriched uranium, though a recent State Department intelligence analysis holds that there would not be enough for a nuclear weapon until 2013. The Iranian nuclear program has vast national support, as it is perfectly clear that Iran has the right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. The weaponization of Iran's emerging capabilities is seen by some, notably the Israelis, both as inevitable and as an existential threat, especially because of Ahmadinejad's absurdist but nonetheless chillingly menacing jibes that Israel deserves annihilation.

The European Union and the US have been trying for years to talk Iran into non-weapons routes to nuclear power, holding out various guarantees. It hasn't been enough for the generalized Iranian public sense of fairness and national pride. But it is believed by participants in those talks that the decision to proceed toward weaponization has not been taken.

Obama had set an informal deadline of this autumn for initiating a more meaningful dialogue with Iran. Now, an unsettled Iranian regime is hardly in a position to talk seriously. Moreover, even if it could speak with confidence, the images of the last two months and the conduct of the Iranian regime have made outreach to this cast of Iranian leaders vastly more complicated politically.

Still, Obama has to hold Israel back because an Israeli attack would

simply make Ahmadinejad's day, not to mention the profound havoc it would wreak on the whole area.

Tough sanctions on Iran are being debated in Congress, including a ban on the export to Iran of gasoline. (Iran has inadequate refining capacity for its own oil.) But more US sanctions would achieve little. The US is therefore discussing the doability of a joint UN Security Council approach with the Europeans, and with China and with Russia, countries averse to such measures, but probably less motivated to back Iran to the hilt than they were before. (To the Basiji cries of "Death to America," demonstrators had riposted "Death to China! Death to Russia!" a counter-message that would not have gone unnoticed.)

Iran's economic situation, which has slid downward with the price of oil, could reinforce second thoughts. Other Iranian leaders — notably the speaker of the Majlis, or parliament, Ali Larijani, a tough former nuclear negotiator but a realist who knows the world — may emerge as new poles of influence in the wake of Ahmadinejad's diminishment. What is clear is that Supreme Leader Khamenei will do what it takes to stay in power himself. That may well indicate compromises at home and abroad in light of apparent internal divisions over the events since the election.

The Iranian drama this summer has been simultaneously inspiring, depressing, illuminating and humbling. It continues. Iran is front and centre. Ultimately the voice of its people will determine their future.

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