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# Mourning Montazeri

The remarkable life of Iran's bravest cleric.

Abbas Milani December 21, 2009 | 12:25 am

Ayatollah Hosseinali Montazeri, the highest ranking Shiite cleric in Iran and a leading voice of dissent for more than two decades, died Saturday of what his family said was a lingering heart ailment. His memorial is shaping up as yet another occasion for the Iranian people to show their resentment of the current regime. Thousands of people are traveling to Qom, where he lived and died, to attend the funeral. The opposition has announced a day of national mourning.

Montazeri lived a remarkable life, a man willing to forgo the temptations of power if the price is overlooking or keeping silent about breaches of basic human values.

Born in 1922 to a poor but pious family, he studied not only with Ayatollah Khomeini but with Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, easily the most esteemed Shiite leader of his time. In Shiite clerical hierarchy, the stature of your teachers is a significant measure of your own

stature. Montazeri's pedagogical pedigree was singular for it combined the unmatched erudition of Boroujerdi with the political bravura of Khomeini. Moreover, Montazeri had been relentless in fighting on the side of his mentor throughout the '60s and '70s when Khomeini lived in exile. After the victory of the revolution, he had emerged clearly as the second most powerful man in Iran. The 1986 decision to name him the successor to Khomeini codified in law what was already evident in practice.

Tensions between Khomeini and Montazeri began when someone on Montazeri's staff leaked the story of secret deals between Iran and the United States--what turned out to be the Iran-Contra Affair. Khomeini executed the staffer, despite protestations from Montazeri. A few months later, as the nation learned of Khomeini's ill health, Montazeri learned of mass executions in prisons on the order of Khomeini. Prisoners serving time on earlier charges were to be retried--in procedures often lasting no more than a few minutes--and executed if found to be still opposed to the regime. Instead of keeping a pragmatic silence and awaiting Khomeini's death, as many of his advisors recommended, Montazeri wrote a harshly worded letter to Khomeini condemning the orders, saying that this is not the kind of revolution they had fought for together.

This time, the price for protesting murder and moral perfidy was the direct wrath of Khomeini. Montazeri was not only stripped of all his

power, but ridiculed in the press by many, including Khomeini's son, as an imbecile--a country bumpkin at best, unwittingly used and abused by "enemies of Islam." The media began a vicious campaign of character assassination against Montazeri, the man Khomeini had not long before called "the essence of my life" and a "pillar of Islam." He became the butt of jokes and abuse, with some clerics loyal to Khomeini even suggesting that he be deprived of his right to wear the clerical attire. He was put under house arrest for five years, and has remained under constant surveillance ever since. Visiting him often led to recrimination from the regime.

In spite of the on-going media campaign against him, his moral stature, clerical authority, and popular base of support increased. More and more, he became the voice of moral outrage at the regime's egregious behavior. He issued fatwas that were theologically innovative or attempted to refine existing rules by making them more commensurate with democracy. He became the first ayatollah to issue a fatwa that decreed Iranian members of the Bahai faith must enjoy all the rights afforded an Iranian citizen--boldly indicting the regime's brutal treatment of this Iranian religious minority.

Montazeri recently issued a fatwa saying more clearly and more categorically that any other ayatollah that the development, deployment, or investment towards acquiring a nuclear bomb is against Islam and humanity--making him the most prominent domestic opponent of a nuclear bomb. He openly apologized for the fact that the regime, while he was a leading member of it, sanctioned

the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran.

Finally, on numerous occasions, he apologized for saddling the nation with the despotism of *Velayat-e Fagih*, or the guardianship of the clergy; he was the president of the constituent assembly that first drafted the revolutionary constitution and was, more than anyone, responsible for introducing this undemocratic concept into the document. Aside from his words of apology, he also tried to reformulate the concept by arguing that he and other founding fathers meant the clergy to only have supervisory role and no executive power. More importantly, he suggested that the supreme leader occupy his position only if he enjoyed the support and consent of the people, and that his tenure in office was intended to be limited in time and his authority impeachable by popular vote. In other words, he desperately tried to offer a more democratic reading of a concept that has been the chief obstacle to democracy in Iran for the last 30 years.

The history of Iran is littered with rulers impervious to ethical principles, incapable of remorse, and unwilling to engage in self-criticism. Montazeri will join the minority of leaders who tried to abide in power by the same moral values they had espoused in opposition, and the even smaller minority of men and women who shunned the temptations of power to live a life of moral rectitude, self-criticism, and courage.

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