

Published on *World Affairs Journal* (<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org>)

[Home](#) > Mullahs on the Verge: Iran's People, Iran's Pulpits

## Mullahs on the Verge: Iran's People, Iran's Pulpits

Abbas Milani



The Iranian people are in a state of suspense as they watch an increasingly oppressive militarist junta and a more democratic regime both struggling to be born. History shows that such moments of turbulent stasis don't last long. A tipping point is on the way, and prudent policies on the part of the West, particularly the United States, can help determine which way it will fall.

Prudence, in this case, involves understanding some of the factors that lie beneath the surface of the current social and political conflict. The crystal ball for Iran's future may

be cloudy, but certain things have already become clear. Even before the rigged election, the current regime had proved itself incapable of solving chronic economic problems of double-digit inflation and double-digit unemployment (with unemployment among young adults reaching 30 percent), and of creating new jobs for the million or so young men and women who enter the job market each year. A pandemic of corruption and cronyism in the bureaucracy and incessant interference in the private lives and public demeanor of its citizens have collided with the people's clear desire for personal autonomy and government transparency. The Islamic Republic cannot or will not resolve the conflict between its misogynist laws and the relentless efforts of Iranian women, who have become the most committed advocates of democracy in Iran over the last two decades. No wonder former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most powerful men in the country, calls Iranian society a "seething volcano of resentment."

In the election of June 12, that volcano finally erupted. The opposition has made a good case that the officially sanctioned results of the vote exactly reversed the true outcome, and that Mir Hossein Moussavi won the election with almost 24 million votes. Whatever the precise numbers, no more than 20 percent of the 70 million people of Iran can be said to have cast their ballots for the status quo. These stalwarts come from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards, their families, the Basiji (the gangs-cum-militia who provide the muscle of the regime) and their families, and the relatives of martyrs from the war with Iraq, who receive regular stipends from the regime.

The events of the last three months have even revealed fissures in the foundational rationale of the Islamic Republic. The regime claims to be *Velayat-e Fagih*, the "Guardianship of Jurists," but the great bulk of the highest-ranking Shiite clergy, the Ayatollahs, have no role in the government. Many of them—foremost among them Ayatollah Sistani—disagree with the very concept of the "Guardianship" as reinvented by Ayatollah Khomeini. Most of these ayatollahs remain followers of the "Quietist" school of Shiism, which instructs that during the absence of the twelfth Imam—his "major Occultation," in Shiite parlance—the ayatollahs, as the highest authority of Shiism, should not seize power and attempt to create an "Islamic state." That privilege is reserved for the

missing messiah. Ayatollah Khomeini, by contrast, campaigned for an overhaul of this idea, and called for a seizure of power and the creation of an “Islamic state” as soon as the situation permitted.

The Quietist ayatollahs have either been literally silent on the current crisis, or have openly taken issue with Mr. Khamenei's authoritarian stance and even sided publicly with those who have protested against it. Perhaps more significantly, however, many of the top ayatollahs inside Iran who bolstered Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of the state—like Ayatollah Montazeri (under house arrest for more than two decades) and the Ayatollahs Taheri, Sanei, and Amoli (all favorites of Khomeini)—today not only defy Khamenei, but challenge his very fitness for the job of supreme leader (or *Vali-Fagih*).

As a result, the clerical leadership is in unprecedented disarray. Some of the sturdiest pillars of the regime—people like Rafsanjani, his successor as president Mohammed Khatami, former parliament chairman and recent presidential candidate Mehdi Karubi, and Moussavi, each of whom has at one time headed one of the three branches of government—have created a de facto coalition against the increasingly authoritarian rule of Khamenei, the supreme leader, and against the demagoguery of his handpicked president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This coalition may not agree on every issue, but it is now a matter of consensus among the opposition that June 12 marked the launch of an electoral coup.

Even among the ranks of clergy previously close to the regime, a rift has cracked wide open. The minister of intelligence and four of his deputies were summarily fired by Ahmadinejad, for instance, because they disagreed with the regime's insistence that Iran's crisis had been caused by a Western conspiracy, a “color revolution” concocted by the United States and implemented with the help of the British government. Khamenei has tried to distance himself from his own protégé by saying that he only supports “the good side” of Ahmadinejad, but all his efforts seem to be in vain.

It is certain that Khamenei's days as the supreme leader—he whose words reign as the undisputed law of the land, or *Fasl al-Khtab* in Shiite theology—have now ended. He may retain the trappings of power, but only as the junior member of a triumvirate, including Ahmadinejad and the commanders of the Revolutionary Guard who staged the electoral coup. Only hours after Khamenei's speech of reconciliation, Ahmadinejad publicly demanded the harshest punishment for the leaders of the reform movement.

The question yet to be resolved is whether this triumvirate can seal the profound chasm that now divides the establishment. Despite Ahmadinejad's incessant attacks on him and his family, Rafsanjani could still be chosen to deliver the Friday sermon—an honor bestowed only on the most venerated of holy men. This shows how deeply the fissure runs. While Khamenei and his cohorts praised the recent presidential election as “blessed,” the “freest in the world,” and the “death knell of liberal democracy in the world,” Rafsanjani declared it incurably flawed, and the source of a “crisis of confidence” in the nation. It was, he said, un-Islamic to “ignore people's votes.”

His opposition was echoed by arguably the most radical of the onetime pillars of the regime—

Mehdi Karubi, the other reformist candidate along with Moussavi in the recent election. Karubi's recently published letter to Rafsanjani demanding an investigation into evidence of the mass rape of men and women in prison caused an uproar in Iran's politics. Even some in the regime have conceded that prisoners have been raped and abused by their interrogators; stories about secret detention centers where prisoners simply "disappear" have become commonplace.

Khamenei has not been silent in these days and weeks. On July 20, he loosed a well-orchestrated and dramatic attack on those who would defy him. His speech, echoed by his mouthpiece, a daily paper called *Kayhan*, threatened Rafsanjani, Khatami, and the rest of the opposition with a "storm" that would engulf them. Meanwhile, commanders of the Republican Guard were making ominous threats of their own. In recent weeks, their magazine *Sobhe-Sadeq* ("True Morning") openly called for the arrest of Moussavi, Karubi, and Khatami on charges of treason. The show trial of one hundred leaders of the opposition, and their forced confessions to absurd crimes—exactly reminiscent of the Moscow trials of the 1930s—has offered the latest preview of things to come.

Still, the opposition has shown no sign of backing down. The many ongoing acts of resistance, such as the continued publication of some opposition papers, even those whose editors languish in prison, reveal the complexity of the current political landscape and the tenacity and prestige of the reformers. Khamenei controls the military and the police, but the opposition enjoys the support of the Iranian people. Every night, shouts of "Death to the dictator!" ring out in the streets of Tehran. Nearly all of Iran's private sector has also come down squarely in the camp of the opposition.

The valor and dignity of millions of peaceful demonstrators in Tehran and other cities protesting the rigged election have shaken the politics of the Iranian diaspora as well. In spite of years of vivid brutality by the regime, the large Iranian diaspora has been, until recently, surprisingly quiescent. Now, all across the United States, Australia, Canada, and Europe, groups of concerned Iranians have gathered to further the cause of democracy in Iran. (A Green Coordination Committee is forming, and has already formalized relations with democrats of Russia, organized by Garry Kasparov.) The activities of these expatriates will not only affect facts on the ground in Iran but also shape the dialogue in America and Europe about realities inside Iran.

Yet the regime enjoys some international support as well, from European companies like Nokia Siemens Networks and, more crucially, from foreign governments. China and Russia, both eager to cement their footholds in Iran and to confront and curtail U.S. power in the region, and India, with its increasingly crucial role in many facets of Iran's economy, have all assisted the regime in fortifying its oppressive apparatus at home. A new member of this alliance is Venezuela. Each week brings fresh reports of ever closer ties of "friendship" and "anti-imperialist" struggle between the Iranian despots and their Venezuelan counterparts.

These same forces that now come to Ahmadinejad's defense have been responsible for delaying and diluting U.N. resolutions concerning the regime's nuclear program. That we now hear, in Friday sermons, spontaneous shouts of "Death to Russia" and "Death to China," instead of the usual orchestrated shouts of "Death to America," suggests the extent of public disgust with the regime's international supporters.

The dangerous ebb and flow of politics inside Iran, the growing voice of the Iranian diaspora, and Ahmadinejad's desperate outreach to governments willing to bless his rule have further confounded the new American administration's effort to devise a coherent Iran policy. In recent years, there have been two tendencies, both flawed in my view, that have dominated Washington's debate about Iran. Scholars and experts functioning as apologists for the current government in Tehran, as well as a few companies eager to do business in Iran, have claimed that the Ahmadinejad–Khameni regime is resolute and invulnerable, and its democratic opponents fitful and lacking in critical mass. The regime is here to stay, they say; the United States must make a "grand bargain" with it. Forgo any attempt at regime change, offer the current government all the security guarantees that it demands, and, in return, expect that it will forfeit its atomic ambitions.

This line of reasoning has several flaws. It overestimates the regime's strength and overlooks its profound strategic vulnerabilities, which are today more pronounced and evident than ever before. Moreover, the policy counts on the regime to keep its word. Such a policy ignores the fact that the hardline clerics who rule Iran are self-proclaimed believers in the Shiite doctrine of *Tagiye*—lying to infidels. Can a regime that embraces such a theological concept really be trusted? A "grand bargain" may be a good deal for the clerical regime and for those convinced that the business of America is business. But it is a bad bargain for U.S. foreign policy as a whole. Any hint that America has suspended its commitment to human rights and democracy in Iran amounts to a betrayal of those forces battling for their liberty on the streets of Tehran.

It must be said that those in Israel and the West who justifiably worry about a nuclear Iran and advocate a policy of externally led "regime change" are also wrong. These voices argue that military strikes against Iranian nuclear sites would prod an already dissatisfied Iranian population into a massive uprising against the regime. In reality, the forces now controlling Iran would be immeasurably strengthened by an American or (especially) Israeli attack.

The way to thwart this regime is not through smart bombs, but smart diplomacy and smart sanctions that will contain the Islamic Republic's ability to engage in mischief around the world, all the while sending a positive message to the democratic forces of Iran. This policy ought to have as its ultimate end helping Iran become a democratic polity—and acknowledge that only the Iranian people can bring this result about. Based on what we know of Iranian history and human psychology, a military attack will prompt the now divided Iranian people to rally around the flag, and replace opposition to the regime with a patriotism that strengthens it.

The United States and other democracies around the world can help the cause of democracy in Iran by withholding recognition of the Ahmadinejad government. Advocates of "engagement" should concede that it is impossible to engage with a country unless you know who rules it and with what degree of legitimacy. Clearly Ahmadinejad's highly compromised condition makes him an ever less plausible interlocutor. The next few months will surely provide a clue as to who genuinely rules Iran and how they intend to conduct themselves on the international scene. When engagement comes, its goal should be to boost the people changing Iran from within, not to return them to their silence.

Abbas Milani is the Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University. His latest book is *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979* (Syracuse