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Neda Agha-sultan And Iran's Opposition

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This week marks the 40-day anniversary of Neda Agha-Sultan's murder during an anti-regime protest in Iran on June 20. A video [1] of her bleeding to death quickly circulated via the internet, turning Neda into one of the most well-known images of the regime's brutal repression. The Shi'ite tradition of commemorating the 40th day after a person's death has historically influenced [2] the momentum of Iran's protest movements, playing a particularly visible role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. If the commemoration of Neda's death this week reinvigorates the waning opposition, she will be a fitting symbol for their cause.

For more than a thousand years, the Persian language has been both a

vessel of Persian nationalism and a tool for fighting Islamo-Arab influences. Islamists have long believed Arabic to be the "perfect" language, the one Allah used when he spoke with Adam and Eve in heaven and when he revealed divine truths to Mohammad on earth. In recognition of this sanctity, Iranian Islamists have tried to infuse the Persian language with Arabic words and grammar. Before the revolution, Islamo-Arabic names--Mohammad, Hassan, Hussein, Ali, Reza--were prevalent amongst every strata of Iranian society; in the last two decades, a new generation of Iranian parents have showed their disdain for the status quo and its ideology by rejecting Islamic names in favor of others that are purely Persian and secular in their connotations. And so it is with Neda--a Persian name, meaning "the clarion call," or "the voice."

When, in the early 1920s, her grandparents, like all Iranians, were presumably ordered by the government to pick a family name, they could not have imagined that the surname they picked, 75 years later, would become a potent metaphor of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's autocratic rule. *Agha*, a Mongolian term picked up by the Arabs, means sir or master; it is also used by Khamenei's inner circle to refer to him. The clerical cognoscenti referred to his predecessor, Ayatollah Khomeini, as *Agha* as well.

The term *Agha-Zadeh*, meaning "son of an Agha," has in recent years come to refer to the thousands of children of the clergy, now millionaires and billionaires, who use their fathers' connections to rapidly and illicitly enrich themselves. Today, Mojtaba, Khamenei's son, is the most infamous *Agha-Zadeh*. According to the *Guardian*, he has more than 1.7 billion pounds in his personal account, which the British government, according to this report, has now frozen. Mojtaba is one of the masterminds of the electoral coup of June 12, as well as one of the main culprits in rigging Ahmadinejad's first presidential victory four years ago.

Many Iranian democrats worry that the Khameneis, father and son, are emulating North Korea not just in its nuclear program but also in their succession scheme.

The third part of Neda's name, "Sultan," is Arabic for an absolutist ruler, as in the Ottoman Empire. It also conjures up Max Weber's theory of Sultanist regimes, in which one man has absolute domination over society's every political domain.

The blood streaming down Neda's face, the young life emptying out of her dying eyes, dramatically evoke the price extracted to ensure the regime's brutal grip over the country. The modernity evident in her dress, her defiant presence on the streets to demand her rights, are powerfully emblematic of Iran's predominantly young and cosmopolitan population, increasingly driven by women, resolute in their struggle against tyranny.

--*Abbas Milani*

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