

NEW REPUBLIC

Standing Eight

by Abbas Milani | April 30, 2010

The last few months have seen a disquieting lull in news of political dissent from Iran. On the surface, at least, Ahmadinejad's government seems to have outlasted the furor that erupted in the wake of last June's election. Does this mean that the Green Movement is dead?

Not necessarily. Given the sheer number of people who have been arrested and tortured (political inmates at Iran's most notorious prison just sent an incredible letter to several grand ayatollahs, detailing sexual, physical, and mental torture), it would be understandable if the Green Movement's leaders had fallen completely silent. But they have continued to speak out. Mir Hossein Mousavi, for one, has evinced no signs of buckling under to the regime. Ten days ago, he met with other Green Movement leaders and said that while the "path to victory" would be "long and arduous," he encouraged everyone to persevere. Then, this past Sunday, while meeting with veterans of the Iran-Iraq war, he said that the country's current rulers were in breach of both the constitution and the tenets of Islam. And he blasted those in the regime who dismiss all critics as lackeys of Zionism.

Meanwhile, Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnava, has recently become increasingly unabashed in her criticisms of the regime. Last Thursday, during a meeting with families of political prisoners, she spoke defiantly of a "police state" in Iran and of "freedom fighters," denouncing the regime that has "arrested them, tortured them, used harsh interrogation techniques against them, sewn their lips, and hung them to die." She ended the meeting by demanding "freedom for all political prisoners" and freedom "from the big prison that is Iran." On Monday, she mocked the government's international conduct by asking, "What honor is there in making Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, or China the crown glory" of the country's foreign policy?

For his part, reform leader Mehdi Karubi declared a couple weeks ago in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that "despotism" and fear have not worked and that "the status quo is untenable," adding that he and the Green Movement have asked the government for permission to hold a demonstration on the anniversary of last June's election—and that, beneath the apparent calm, there is a society on the verge of eruption. And, just this Tuesday, Karubi and Mousavi met and together called on the government to allow them to hold the June rally.

Beyond the leadership of the Green Movement, there are additional signs of fissures within Iran's governing elite. On Ahmadinejad's trip to the city of Qom earlier this month, according to one report, virtually every major

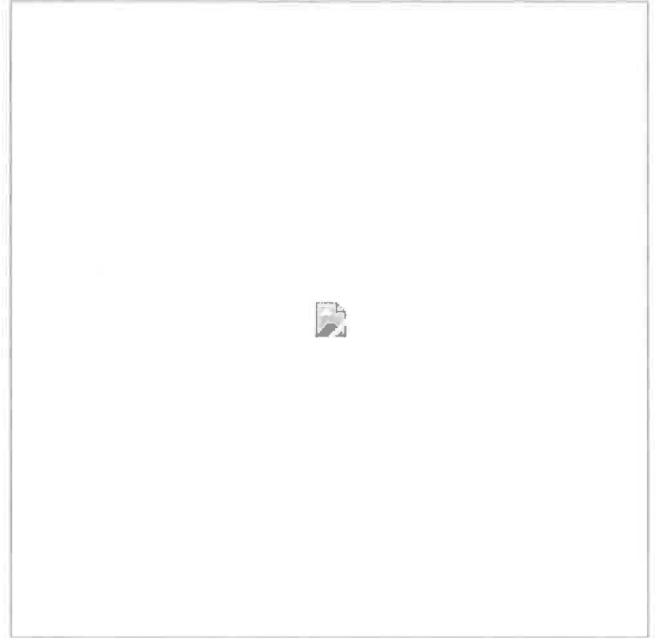


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ayatollah refused to meet with him—despite direct pressure from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself. The Qom ayatollahs provide the theological legitimacy for the regime and their support is essential for any president's success. While none publicly explained their reasons for refusing to meet Ahmadinejad, the symbolism was hard to miss.

In addition, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a pragmatist who has long positioned himself between the reformers and the hardliners, still seems to be betting that the Green Movement has a future. Despite the fact that the regime has issued an arrest warrant for one of his sons (now in Europe) and that court proceedings have begun against one of his daughters (an unabashed supporter of the Green Movement, also in Europe at the moment), he still has yet to accept Khamenei's invitation—issued repeatedly in the weeks after the June election—to join the fold. (Khamenei's cronies subsequently echoed this entreaty, sometimes naming Rafsanjani directly, sometimes merely alluding to him.) In characteristic fashion, Rafsanjani has continued to send ambiguous messages. On the one hand, he recently made appearances both with Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. At the same time, in one of the last sessions of the Expediency Council—a key government committee that Rafsanjani has led for years—he and Mohsen Rezaei, who was commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for 18 years, co-sponsored a resolution calling for an end to the role of the Guardian Council in vetting candidates. This is one of the main demands of the Green Movement. The resolution would have to clear many hurdles before becoming law, but the mere fact of its passage was a direct challenge to the authority of Khamenei.

Of course, the one thing that matters most—the question of whether there remains a mass public appetite for protest and resistance—is also the most difficult thing to know. There is no doubt in my mind that Iranians remain hungry for democracy; the question is whether there are enough people who will be willing to once again take to the barricades in the near future. Still, the fact that the Green Movement's leaders are not backing down is an indication that they at least think their public is still behind them. That seems reason enough to conclude that popular support for the Green Movement persists.

This, of course, is not something the regime and its apologists are eager to hear. To them, the Green Movement was a series of intermittent explosions. Recently, a Friday Prayer leader in Tehran called last year's post-election events a "political earthquake." (He also said that women refusing to fully cover themselves would cause a literal earthquake.) But it is more accurate to see the Iranian democratic movement as rooted in a long-term structural malaise—in deep tensions and fissures in the body politic; in the rapidly failing economic fabric of society; in the fact that 20 to 30 million Iranians have Internet access; and in an overall dissatisfaction among Iranians, particularly women and the young, with their lack of personal and political freedom. This reading of the Green Movement explains why it has not yet disappeared. And why it probably won't anytime soon.

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