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The Mousavi Mission

by Abbas Milani | February 17, 2010

Traditional Iranian husbands, the sort found in the highest ranks of the Islamic Republic, sometimes refer to their wives as “the house.” For them, this is not just an expression of their understanding of gender relations. It is viewed as a necessary euphemism, vital protection for a woman’s honor. The mere uttering of her name, after all, might compromise her chastity.

It is telling, therefore, that Mir Hossein Mousavi courted and eventually married Zahra Rahnavard. When they met, in 1969, Rahnavard was already an acclaimed pioneer in the field of Islamic feminism, as well as a sculptor and critic and all-around star of the intellectual scene that throbbed in Tehran at that time. But it was her political theories that vaulted her farthest: Rahnavard proffered the kind of critique of patriarchy percolating in the Western academy at the time. Yet she didn’t join her sisters in the West in launching an all-out assault on tradition. Yes, Islam has misogynistic elements, she argued in her speeches. But those misogynistic elements are not necessarily native to Islam. They only prevail because of the male domination of the faith.

For Mousavi, the choice of Rahnavard as his bride was particularly daring--and reveals much about him. Men of his generation, particularly those with a religious proclivity, rarely married assertive intellectuals, let alone intellectuals with greater stature and more impressive curricula vitae. Throughout his career, friends and foes have referred to him as “the husband of Zahra Rahnavard.”

Zahra Rahnavard’s husband, of course, has emerged as the towering figure of the Iranian democratic movement--the man whose campaign inspired so much hope and whose thwarted election has unleashed an unprecedented wave of protest. Yet, for all his centrality to these events, he remains essentially a fuzzy figure in most press accounts.

At first glance, his long career is a riddle: How could he possibly represent the forces for liberalism and democracy when he served as such a loyal foot soldier in Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolution? During his eight years as prime minister, back in the 1980s, the regime committed terrible atrocities. It was involved in a brutal military conflict--an eight-year war that Iran prolonged needlessly.

But, even without this history, Mousavi would be enigmatic. His aversion to the limelight, soft voice, and natural shyness make him a perfect tabula rasa. At times in these past few months, Mousavi has seemed nothing more



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than a passive actor in all the grand historic drama of the Green Revolution. Did he ever intend to unleash a movement challenging the very core of the Islamic Republic? Has he simply been carried along by the enthusiasms of his supporters?

But there are enough clues lurking in the annals that a profile of the man begins to emerge. There are simple facts like his courtship of Zahra Rahnavard--a defiant act that prefigured a lifetime of subtly bucking the forces of reaction. The Green Movement's showdown with the regime is, in fact, the culmination of Mousavi's long struggle.

Mir Hossein Mousavi Khamenei was born in 1941 in the northwestern city of Khameneh. He is, as his full surname suggests, a distant relative of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei--his lifelong nemesis. His father was a tea merchant of modest means. When he left home for the newly established National University in Tehran, he didn't land in the coveted schools of medicine, engineering, or law. Still, it was pretty impressive for a kid from the provinces to win entry into the Faculty of Art and Architecture. At the time Mousavi started, the National University was filled with children of the upper class. But, before he finished there, the state nationalized the institution and diversified its socioeconomic composition. It became a hotbed of opposition to the Shah. Mousavi, in fact, helped create and shape the school's Islamic student association, one such anti-regime outpost.

By the time he received a master's degree in architecture in the late '60s, the politics of the Iranian intelligentsia had begun to shift. Modern men and women no longer equated Islam with superstition. Mousavi began hanging out at the Hosseiniye Ershad--a meeting place built by some of the more moderate supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The whole program at Hosseiniye Ershad was intended to appeal to the modern sensibilities of the urban, educated middle classes who might otherwise have avoided mosques--people very much like Mousavi and Rahnavard.

One of Hosseiniye Ershad's main draws was a fiery orator called Ali Shariati. Hardly a man of great erudition, Shariati had a gift for ideological alchemy, which perhaps explains his outsize influence. While studying in Paris, he had inhaled all the revolutionary doctrines of the era. His lectures in Tehran attempted to synthesize Marx and Muhammad, Imam Hussein (the quintessence of the Shia cult of martyrdom) and Che Guevara. It all added up to a sort of liberation theology. His eclectic brand of Shiism promised to usher in revolution in this world and salvation in the next.

Shariati's inherently incongruent ideology was emblematic of the incongruent political coalition that came together in Iran's pre-revolutionary days. Khomeini himself sometimes usurped Marxist rhetoric in his fusillades against the United States and capitalism, as well as in his encomiums for the poor. In his critique of the traditional Shia clergy--a group that he described as sclerotic and superstitious, enemies of progress and true Islam--Shariati had exempted Khomeini, praising him for his fierce fight against despotism and colonialism.

This was a message that resonated with Mousavi. Like Shariati, he boiled over with anger at the ancien régime. He too attacked the Shah's despotism and dependence on the West. (He wrote essays under the nom de guerre "Rahro," the seeker, or traveler.) Like his mentor, Shariati, Mousavi grew enamored of Khomeini, especially in the euphoric glow of revolution. But, ever since his days at Hosseiniye Ershad, we can also see in Mousavi traces of Shariati's fulminations against conservative, traditional mullahs, a dislike that long predates the Green

Movement.

In some respects, Shariati was one of the most important ideologues of the revolution. He died two years before the Shah's regime toppled. And, in Shariati's inconsistent but seductive rhetoric, there were hints of the futile promise of the revolution--the idea that a new regime might manage to fulfill the greatest hopes of the left-wing radicals, the Qom-based clerics, and the middle classes who hoped to synthesize those poles. Only in the face of the Shah's repression could the tensions inherent in this coalition be sublimated. And, even then, they were real. Before Shariati's death, Khomeini denounced and effectively banned him from speaking at the Ershad.

Indeed, these ideological tensions remain the dominant ideological fault line in Iranian politics. The reform movements--embodied first by President Mohammad Khatami and, now, represented in the leadership of the Green Movement--are, in essence, the wing of the revolution's unwieldy coalition that feel betrayed by the despotic rightward turn of the regime.

By any measure, the rise of a little-known architect and newspaper editor to the highest ranks of the new regime was surprising, even meteoric. But, by the time of the revolution, Mousavi had built a reputation as a leading intellectual and man of unquestionable pieties. And, at that moment, the regime needed a façade that projected a spirit of inclusion, that could ballast its far-flung coalition. With both his demeanor and ideological roots in the Ershad, Mousavi exuded exactly those reassuring qualities. What's more, he had a powerful friend and patron in Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, the secretary of the Islamic Revolution Council. Shortly after the revolution, Beheshti, with an assist from Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei, organized the Islamic Republican Party and named Mousavi editor-in-chief of the party's newspaper. When Beheshti and more than 70 other top leaders of the regime were killed by terrorist attacks, Mousavi, having only served a brief tenure as foreign minister, began his rapid ascent to the premiership.

Today's great struggle in Iranian politics pits Mousavi against Ali Khamenei. It was that way from, more or less, the birth of the regime. During Mousavi's tenure as prime minister, Khamenei was president. In those days, authority rested primarily in the hands of the prime minister, while the presidency was a largely symbolic office. Khamenei, however, never accepted such limits. He consistently overstepped onto Mousavi's turf, attempting to grab power and interfere. Genuine ideological differences undergirded this rivalry. Khamenei was increasingly aligned with the conservative clergy and with the forces in the bazaar who were opposed to the state's domination of the economy and demanded a freer hand in making profits from their activities. His ideological guru was a man named Navvab Safavi--the founder of the Islamic terrorist group Fadayan Islam (Martyrs of Islam). Mousavi, on the other hand, pushed for the state to take a more activist role in managing the economy.

As president, more than once, Khamenei tried to oust Mousavi. He solicited the help of other top clerics like Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri. Both declined to join the effort. When Khamenei won reelection in 1985, he wrote Khomeini a letter detailing his voluminous complaints against Mousavi. Though the letter has never been made public, we can deduce that the complaints were both personal and ideological: He railed against Mousavi's technocratic inclinations and his toleration of artists and intellectuals who were not, in the strict sense, Islamist. But Khamenei's many attempts to rid himself of Mousavi came to naught. Khomeini defended Mousavi. In an implicit attack on Khamenei, Khomeini once declared that Mousavi's critics could not even run a bakery--in other words, what impressed Khomeini most about Mousavi was his management of the economy. But Khomeini was not Mousavi's only champion. The Revolutionary Guard also adored him. His reputation rested on his probity. He organized a system of food rationing that was generally free of corruption.

And there was a broad sense that Mousavi resisted the pocket-lining temptation that befell so many of his comrades.

There are two clouds, however, that hover over his years in office. The first is his role in the Iran-Contra affair. Although he didn't greet Oliver North when the Marine arrived in Tehran, allegedly bearing a cake and a bible, Mousavi was in the thick of negotiations with him. According to some accounts, he was one of three top Iranian officials--the others are Rafsanjani and Khamenei--who brokered the deal to trade the release of American hostages in Lebanon in return for the sale of much needed U.S. arms. Working so closely with the Great Satan took its toll on Mousavi's reputation. (While Rafsanjani also paid a price for his role in the affair, Khamenei successfully kept his own role secret.)

By far, the most severe (and most repeated) criticism about Mousavi is his role in the 1988 execution of close to 4,000 members of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a political party that had split with Khomeini and violently opposed him. Most of the slaughtered were simply political prisoners. What role did Mousavi play in this episode? At best, he was ignorant of the event, which is what he recounts. We also have an account of the episode in the memoirs of the recently deceased Ayatollah Montazeri. When Montazeri strenuously objected to the massacre, Khomeini removed him as his designated successor. Montazeri's memoir makes clear that many in the top tier of government--including then-President Ali Khamenei--were unaware of the murders. Moreover, Montazeri's fervent support for Mousavi's presidential campaign enhances the credibility of his claim of ignorance. Still, even if he can be absolved of this crime, he couldn't have survived so long in one of the top positions of this regime without making many other sacrifices of his conscience.

With the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Mousavi's political career came to an abrupt end. Ali Khamenei became the country's next supreme leader, and, in the constitutional revision that made his ascension possible, he backed a successful campaign to eliminate the role of the prime minister entirely. Exiled from power by the politicians, Mousavi retreated into aesthetics--painting, architecture, serving as president of the national Academy of the Arts.

Of course, it is always difficult, even dangerous, to extract ideological insights from an artist's oeuvre. But, in Iran, art rarely exists within a vacuum. Traditional Islam forbids the reproduction of a human face. Such creation, it believes, must remain the monopoly of Allah. As a result, Islamic art has largely sublimated the aesthetic impulse into formalism--ornate calligraphy, arabesque tiles, and, of course, Persian rugs.

Mousavi's paintings are well within this tradition. They make no effort to represent reality. They consist of simple lines, beguilingly arranged--sometimes in the style of Mondrian, only more muted, and other times resembling the simple, graceful curves of, say, a Persian dome.

His paintings and architecture can be read as a reflection of the man's own soft-spoken tendencies. But what's important is their eclecticism, their openness to an array of influences. In architecture, he is an avid fan of Renzo Piano, the modernist architect who co-designed the famed Pompidou Center in Paris. What Piano did with buildings--expose the structural armature of a building, instead of hiding it behind aesthetic façades--is a sort of transparency that appeals to Mousavi's democratic instincts. In the many buildings he has designed, Mousavi has been as much inspired by elements of the Piano style as the traditional Iranian style. His paintings and buildings,

no less than his politics, all point to a man not only well-informed about Western aesthetic modernism and political modernity but willing and able to combine them with native elements.

During his long hiatus from electoral politics, Mousavi deepened the ties he had established with Iran's intellectual elite--from Islamist reformers to secular artists--and these ties intensified his liberal instincts. In 1997, when the emerging reformist camp first tried to mount a presidential campaign, it attempted to draft Mousavi. He did not accept. Some suggest he did not believe Khamenei would allow his candidacy to pass the vetting process in the Guardian Council--a body of twelve men that must approve every candidate that appears on any ballot. Others say that he was blackmailed by conservatives who threatened to publish youthful images of his wife without the Islamic hijab. While he did not become a candidate, he and his wife were close advisers to the ultimate reform candidate and winner, Mohammad Khatami.

The Khatami period was at once an era of great openness and great disappointment. And the fact that the theocracy undermined the country's duly elected president--arresting many of his aides, shuttering sympathetic newspapers, and rejecting as inimical to Islamic sharia nearly every law passed by his supporters in the parliament--highlighted the fundamental hopelessness of working within the system, or, at least, the necessity of radically reforming it. After Khatami left office in 2005 and then watched the Ahmadinejad presidency in horror, he contemplated running for his old job last year. But a Khatami candidacy was a risk that Khamenei was not willing to take. And, as the regime pressured Khatami to pull out of the race, Mousavi stepped in to fill the reformist void. It seems that Khamenei viewed him as an acceptably harmless risk to his rule. With Mousavi's low-key demeanor and long absence from politics, it was hard to imagine him posing much of a threat to Ahmadinejad.

But then, something happened on the way to the polls. With the unprecedented participation of his wife--a novelty in the Islamic regime--and with a simple motto of "every citizen a campaign headquarter," Mousavi unleashed an enthusiastic, Internet-savvy campaign that paralyzed the regime. His performance in televised debates helped win over the uncommitted middle. In one debate, Ahmadinejad wielded a sheet of paper, implying that it contained something incriminating about Zahra Rahnavard, and asked menacingly more than once, "Do you want me to show it?" Eventually, Ahmadinejad did question Rahnavard's academic credentials. Rahnavard responded vehemently to the slanders, proudly defending her scholarly record. Mousavi rallied the support of popular celebrities (from the filmmaker Dariush Mehrjui to soccer players). He harvested the accumulating resentment against the regime's economic incompetence and cultural hooliganism. In one of his campaign films--made by a top secular director--Mousavi declares that, if elected, he would end the days of governance by "soothsayers and palm readers," replacing ignorance and arrogance with experts and reason. This message won the support of not just youth and the women's movement, but also the anemic private sector, which helped underwrite the campaign.

Even more remarkable than his campaign has been his stewardship of the Green Movement that has protested the stolen election. The movement is composed of supporters of nearly every political persuasion--from reformists who just want to restore the regime to its "golden days" to those who want to start anew. Mousavi has had to temper the radicalism of the latter and surmount the conservatism of the former. At the same time, he has been careful not to say anything that could be construed as sedition and land him in jail. Mousavi has managed to maintain his coalition through the use of a broad, simple message. Millions marched around the slogan: "What happened to my vote?"

Through it all, Mousavi has acted with astonishing calm. He has issued 17 statements and given a number of

interviews. Reading them as a collection, one can see the arc of his thinking--increasing alienation from the regime and growing dedication to democratic values. In his most recent interview, published last week on his website, *Kalame*, he defiantly, albeit obliquely, compares Khamenei's despotism with that of the Shah. Today's despotism, he declared, is a continuation of royalist despotism. It was a perfect summation of the disappointment felt so deeply by so many of the original revolutionaries.

The regime has tried to make life miserable for Mousavi and his wife. It has arrested his brain trust and forced some to "confess" to egregious crimes. When leaving their home, the couple have been assaulted by regime goons. In the press, they are the subject of a steady campaign of slander that, among other attacks, implies that Mousavi isn't even a Muslim. Sites officially tied to the Revolutionary Guard recently accused Mousavi's wife of "holding in secret the same creed" as Shirin Ebadi, Iran's Nobel laureate. "She is a Zionist Bahai, and has problems with Islam."

Yet, in all of this, the regime has refrained from arresting Mousavi. In an otherwise brutal crackdown, this restraint is an obvious bow to pragmatism. The regime has resisted turning Mousavi into the Nelson Mandela of the movement--a prisoner who would symbolize the regime's horrors, a cause célèbre for world opinion. With his soft voice and modesty, his commitment to non-violence and reason, he's the one martyr that the regime can't afford.

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