



Commentary

Tyranny Loses In Iran

Abbas Milani, 07.01.09, 2:52 PM ET

A tyrannical triumvirate, one that is led by Ayatollah Khamenei and supported by the military might of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the street presence of gangs with ranks numbering at least a few million, seems hell-bent on forcing Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the reluctant and still-resisting people of Iran.

A majority of the Basij, this militia with units in every neighborhood and office around the country, seem to have joined only to enjoy the perks that come with membership—easier access to government handouts, jobs, entrance to colleges for their children, even lucrative management positions. But there are still enough of them, driven by blind faith, to bring havoc and mayhem to the millions of peaceful demonstrators.

The triumvirate had been planning for their brazen coup, and the possible popular resistance, for some months. First came a re-alignment of the IRGC. Instead of a centralized command, they were broken into 31 units: one for each province, two for Tehran. Units of the Basij, hitherto autonomous, were placed under the direct command of the IRGC units. It was declared that fighting a "color revolution"—or, more accurately, suppressing the will of the people—was now the main responsibility of

... new commander was a man named Jaffari. Till then he had led the IRGC's strategic think-tank. His expertise, it was said, was fighting "color revolutions." People whispered that he had been responsible for the IRGC study, commissioned by Khamenei, to map out the early stages of all color revolutions. It was an attempt to nip in the bud any such movement before it could grow to uncontrollable proportions.

When the time for the presidential election approached, the coup triumvirate first faced the danger of a formidable candidate, the reformist Mohammad Khatami. When he announced his willingness to enter the fray, polls showed he would easily beat Ahmadinejad, whose economic failures at home and irrational adventurism abroad had made him highly unpopular.

In the months before the election, Ahmadinejad made a crude attempt to buy the votes of some of the society's most dispossessed. His office issued \$70 cashier checks to anyone who asked. He increased the retirement salaries of some government employees and, in once case, he even gave out sacks of potatoes to win votes from Iran's lower strata. But considering his foes, both in the cities and in the countryside, these gains seemed insignificant. Khatami, in other words, was a problem.

The other early candidate, Mehdi Karubi, was not deemed a serious threat. Though he had already amassed an impressive group of advisers and political activists, though he had offered an impeccably democratic plan and platform, though since "losing" the last presidential campaign he had set out methodically to create a party and launched a paper—*Etemad Melli*—that soon became the most widely read publication in Iran, there was, for reasons impossible to pinpoint, no surge of excitement for his candidacy.

To get Khatami out of the race, his opponents orchestrated a plan of attack. It included physically assaulting him after a speech as well as printing editorials in *Keyhan*, the paper that is generally assumed to speak for Khamenei, that threatened him with a fate like that of Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto—she was assassinated. The threats eventually worked; Khatami withdrew from the race.

The reformists coalesced around the figure of Mir Hossein Mousavi, a dour technocrat. He had served as a hard-line Islamic-socialist prime minister who was often at odds with Khamenei, an over-reaching president. Their path, the triumvirate thought, was now paved for victory.

But it failed to account for two important factors: what Ayatollah Rafsanjani had, before the election, called "a seething volcano of discontent" and, second, Mousavi's resolve and ability to grow into the leader that seething volcano sought. Faced with these inconvenient realities, the triumvirate put all pretense aside and showed the absolute brutality that has long been the sole reason for its survival.

The tyrannical triumvirate has been desperate to find any credible link between the U.S. and the democratic opposition. Their attempts to broadcast tortured confessions from "perpetrators" about how the CIA and other U.S. agencies fomented the revolution has only brought them further ridicule and anger.

Pockets of resistance—from people who risk life and limb to register their protests and face regime goons to clerics and ayatollahs who dare defy Khamenei and the wrath of his machinery of oppression—continue to crop up. It is unclear whether these pockets will succeed in turning the table on the coup's perpetrators.

... t they have already accomplished is almost as important: They have exposed the fabric of lies the regime had worked so hard to weave. It will never be able to re... legitimacy, and the countdown for the triumvirate's ultimate downfall has already begun.

Even though the Shah, who ruled of Iran for almost 40 years, notched impressive accomplishments in the domains of economy and infrastructural change, he could never shake off the damage two events inflicted on his legitimacy. First, the August 1953 toppling of Mossadeq and the image carved in the collective memory of the Iranian people that he was a king installed in power by a coup.

The second event was an uprising in June 1963. Thousands rose up to protest the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini, and more than 100 people were killed by the army, deployed in the streets for a few days. The Shah, people said, had blood on his hands. In just a few days, Khamenei and his accomplices have managed not only to have blood on their hands, but to shed that blood in support of a coup opposed by millions of peaceful Iranians.

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Tehran is a city of 10 million to 12 million people. It is estimated that at least 1 million—and according to some reports, closer to 2 million, (in other words, at least 10% of the population)—came out in the streets for five days to protest what they knew was a rigged election.

Imagine if nearly a million New Yorkers came out to protest a government policy for five days. That is what has happened in Iran.

There were also demonstrators in many other big cities. (In smaller cities, people are afraid to come out, worried that they will be immediately identified by local units of IRGC and the Basij. In big cities, they find safety in numbers.)

Khamenei and his accomplices, this tyrannical triumvirate, have lost the war. But in despotic societies, it sometimes takes a while for this kind of loss to become political reality.

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