



The Good Ayatollah

Why my former cellmate's legacy will live on.

BY ABBAS MILANI | MARCH/APRIL 2010



If 2010 turns out to be the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it

may well be because of the death of one of the regime's founders, a man I met three decades ago in Tehran's infamous Evin prison.

In 1977, I was a 27-year-old rebel arrested for being "detrimental to the security of the nation." In those days nearly all critics of the shah's regime were incarcerated under this category. Evin's L-shaped brick prison blocks were packed with regime opponents, mostly Marxists, leftists, and university students. The facility was also home to a handful of the most famous future leaders of the Islamic Revolution, including future president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and future grand ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri.

It was a relatively good time to be in Evin, as the shah nervously attempted to placate his most fervent enemies by following Jimmy Carter's human rights policies. Instead of being allowed only an hour of fresh air per day in a small outdoor area, we had free access to the grounds. We could play volleyball around the shaky poles and raggedy string that we had woven into a net. (Rafsanjani, I remember, was an enthusiastic but clumsy volleyballer.)

But despite these changes, we were surprised when the guards permitted the clerics to hold a public prayer to mark the end of Ramadan that November -- the first time in years the prisoners had been allowed to do so. To prepare themselves for the ritual, the jailed clerics organized themselves in rows in the prison yard, with Rafsanjani and Montazeri in the front. And then the unassuming, thoughtful Montazeri, dressed in his usual white robe and white pants (always tucked oddly into his socks), was gently nudged forward to lead the prayer -- my first real understanding of the central role he played, even among the august clerics of the revolution there with us in prison.

More than 30 years later, after Montazeri's ascent to the heights of the Islamic Republic and his final crash downward, the ayatollah's death at the end of December 2009 inspired hundreds of thousands of protesters, many clad in the green of today's Iranian opposition movement, to swarm the streets, shouting slogans such as, "Oh, Montazeri, your path will be followed even if the dictator shoots us all!" The demonstrations on the holy day of Ashura a week later revived the protest movement, mobilizing the largest number of demonstrators -- many of whom weren't even alive when the ayatollah was serving time in Evin -- since the unrest over Iran's stolen presidential election last June.

How did the quiet linchpin of the Islamic Revolution become, in his death, a martyr for the forces who would seek to reform or, if need be, overthrow it? To those who knew him in Evin, Montazeri's path was not at all surprising. Throughout his life, Montazeri remained the same true, simple, and honest man he was in prison. That honesty was precisely what would later make him an enemy of the increasingly corrupt Islamic Republic. And it is also exactly what makes him a beloved icon for today's rebels.

In prison, Montazeri spoke simply, and his manners were plain. He came from a small town far from Tehran, and until his dying days he made no attempt to cover up his rural accent. Unlike most other clerics at Evin, who refused to talk to left-leaning prisoners, Montazeri spoke with anyone he found interesting. Each day, he would descend from his cell and walk down to the small yard, where he would pace back and forth for hours. Invariably, he sought a companion, and sometimes that was me. We traded knowledge: I helped him with English (he had been trying to teach himself from a translation of the Quran); in exchange, he would patiently answer my questions about Shiite theology and history.

Montazeri was an intellectual at heart. But he was also deeply involved in politics. For much of the 1960s and 1970s, while Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was in exile in Iraq and later France, Montazeri was his chief representative and money manager in Iran. Almost 60 years old when I knew him in Evin, Montazeri had already been in and out of jail countless times, most recently for refusing to give up the names of Khomeini's benefactors, even under torture.

Just over a year after the prayer in the jail yard, the revolutionaries on the streets unseated the shah. A new regime was declared, the remaining political prisoners were freed, and Montazeri eventually emerged, after Khomeini, as the most powerful man in the country. As Khomeini's designated successor, Montazeri had the ability to appoint many key officeholders and thus handpick the revolution's next leaders: Future president and supreme leader Ali Khamenei, for example, was plucked from near obscurity when Montazeri named him one of four Friday prayer leaders in Tehran.

But Montazeri didn't have the brutality and guile to survive in the contact sport of post-revolution politics. From the start, his more ambitious junior colleagues, such as Rafsanjani and Khamenei, saw him as an obstacle. The more Montazeri insisted on the moral values the revolution's leaders had espoused before coming to power, the more Khamenei and his cohort mocked him for his simple ways and tried to sour his relationship with Khomeini.

The final crisis began when Khomeini executed Mehdi Hashemi, a member of Montazeri's staff and his son-in-law's brother, for exposing what became known in

Washington as the Iran-Contra affair. Around the same time, Montazeri learned that under Khomeini's orders, almost 4,000 prisoners serving time for earlier convictions had been put to death. Montazeri's allies warned him not to say a word and wait until he was supreme leader to push for change. But Montazeri, furious and disillusioned, couldn't wait. In letters to Khomeini, he decried the criminal abuses perpetuated by the regime. "This is not what we fought for," he wrote.

The letters opened up Montazeri to further attacks. Before long, his enemies had stripped him of his positions, hooligans ransacked his home, and he was put under house arrest. A grand ayatollah with thousands of devoted followers, he was too eminent a figure to kill, and the senior clerics rejected rescinding his ayatollah title. So, until 2003, Montazeri was put under house arrest. He remained under strict surveillance for the rest of his life. In a sad irony, he was once again living the isolated life he had in Evin, only this time his tormentors were his former cellmates.

But house arrest gave Montazeri a paradoxical freedom, one he'd wanted for years: the freedom to leave power politics and retreat to his books and his study. Montazeri began to feel painfully responsible for his part in enshrining *velayat-e faqih*, the religious doctrine that gave the supreme leader absolute power over Iran's laws. More than once, he apologized for saddling the country with a despotic regime.

Neither remorse nor threats could stop him from speaking truth to power, and his forced retreat never became an abdication of moral responsibility. Montazeri continued to denounce the autocratic clerics who came after him, most notably his former protégé, Khamenei. He condemned the election results last summer and dismissed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government as being neither

legitimate nor legitimately Muslim.

His legacy is not just a profile in courage, but also a set of pathbreaking ideas in the thousand-year history of Shiism. He was the first Shiite ayatollah, for example, to declare that members of the Bahai faith must enjoy equal rights. He called nuclear weapons not just immoral but against Islam. More than once, he said that all power in an Islamic state must emanate from the people. He showed how the words of a dedicated individual can morph into a mass movement of millions, and how a man once ridiculed and dismissed by the poisoned whispers of his enemies can become the enduring symbol of a democratic movement that is trying to bring Iran into the modern world at last.

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