

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم

بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.economist.com>

A supreme leader at bay

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei faces a growing barrage of opposition. Now prominent intellectuals are adding their voices to the fray

Jan 7th 2010

BACK in the late 1970s, as Iran approached revolution and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi oscillated between conciliation and brutal repression, the more daring of his subjects peppered him with criticism and advice. The open letters he received were couched in expressions of allegiance, yet diminished his aura, not least because they signalled to revolutionary forces the wavering sympathies of their authors. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's current absolute ruler, now has an in-tray full of such counsel. And he has scorned it all.

Ever since last June's disputed election, Mr Khamenei has striven to give an impression of firmness. He began by upholding the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and dismissing calls by Mir Hosein Mousavi, the winner of the election to most independent minds, for the poll to be re-held. Later, as the opposition "green" movement grew in strength, posing a challenge to the Islamic Republic in general and to Mr Khamenei's sinecure, the "guardianship of the jurist" (a cleric at the apex of government) in particular, he let it be known through his ciphers that his critics' only hope of leniency was to repent and throw themselves on his mercy.

The supreme leader's inflexibility now looks like an error. He has infuriated those moderate conservatives who recognise that the events of the second half of last year have changed Iran irrevocably, and who advocate concessions in the name of national unity. Several times since June, politicians and clerics from Mr Khamenei's conservative side of the political divide have proposed helpful measures such as freeing political prisoners, setting up an impartial election

commission and pressing the state broadcasting monopoly to reduce its spectacular bias in favour of the government. Apart from cooling tempers, these measures might have exposed divisions among Mr Mousavi's supporters. Mr Khamenei has dismissed them all.

The most significant contribution to the debate has now come in the form of a manifesto from abroad—from five exiles. The quintet, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohsen Kadivar, Ataollah Mohajerani, Akbar Ganji and Abdolali Bazargan, are far from being out of touch. With the exception of Mr Bazargan, whose importance is partly symbolic—his father headed revolutionary Iran's first government and is now fondly remembered as an opponent of extremism—the signatories are the pick of Iran's public intellectuals. They provided intellectual ballast for the reform movement that brought Muhammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997, from which today's green movement may be said to have sprung. They left Iran relatively recently, and have realistic views of what is going on in the homeland. Their manifesto may turn out to be of historic importance.

In it the five reiterated some old demands, notably for Mr Ahmadinejad's resignation and fresh elections with impartial observers; the lifting of restrictions on political, academic and media activity; and the return to barracks of the Revolutionary Guard, with its vast economic and political interests. The manifesto's most significant paragraphs concerned the future role of what it referred to as the "despotic guardian", Mr Khamenei himself. All the signatories have suffered at the hands of the supreme leader: he personally ended the ministerial career of Mr Mojaherani, for instance, and he approved the hounding of Mr Soroush, a brilliant lay theologian, into exile.

If the exiles' manifesto were implemented, Iran would retain a supreme leader, but he would be elected for a fixed term and lose his ability to block parliamentary legislation through his proxy, the Guardian Council, and to appoint the country's chief justice. In short, he would become a turbaned version of the constitutional monarch for whom Iranian democracy-seekers have pined ever since the country won its first parliament in 1906.

Mr Kadivar, a cleric who shot to notoriety two decades ago when he questioned the legality of the guardianship of the jurist, has indicated that the manifesto is designed to be implemented under Iran's current constitution. This may be read as a rebuff to those longstanding exile groups, monarchist and otherwise, who fondly hope for a role in dismantling—and replacing—the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, Mr Kadivar seems to be saying, the job of building a new Iran will fall to the same reformists who have spent the past 15 years struggling for peaceful change.

The exiles' manifesto may seem premature, given the vast apparatus of repression at the disposal of Messrs Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, and the indifference or hostility of millions of conservative Iranians to the green movement's goals and methods. To be fair, the five exiles recognise the need to broaden the movement's appeal away from its main base, the urban middle class. And they warn of the cumulative dangers posed by a disgruntled populace and a minority of powerful extremists who are ready to "shed the blood of thousands of Iranians" in order to remain in power.

A movement broadens

Last month's funeral for Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, in religious terms Mr Khamenei's most distinguished clerical opponent, may have marked a broadening of the movement along the lines suggested by the five exiles. On December 21st, the day of the funeral, thousands of middle-class Tehranis converged on the holy city of Qom, a bastion of clerical conservatism. In the streets outside Qom's great shrine they joined forces with thousands of traditional, provincial Iranians, devout followers of Montazeri's teachings and rulings, and shouted abuse at some of the Islamic Republic's leading figures. "It was a big day for the city," commented one eyewitness. "People couldn't believe they were hearing such slogans being shouted—in Qom, of all places."

With characteristic bad grace, Mr Khamenei banned mourning ceremonies for Montazeri in some provincial towns, several of which experienced violent demonstrations as a result. No mention was made in the press of the ayatollah's political profile—save in the supreme leader's own, barbed message of condolence.

If the Qom demonstrations gave heart to the green movement, the turbulent protests that were held on December 27th, the anniversary of the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, were a reminder of the pitfalls of ill-discipline. The demonstrators suffered heavy losses—at least eight dead and many more injured and arrested—but skilful manipulation by the state-dominated media meant that brutality by the *baseej*, the state militia under Mr Khamenei's ultimate command, was overshadowed by the demonstrators' own violent responses to the assaults, and by the virulence of their slogans against Mr Khamenei. A movement that once prided itself on non-violence, and whose most inspiring marches were conducted in silence, seemed to be degenerating.

In the days that followed, the authorities and their media allies depicted the opposition as thuggish nihilists who had desecrated Shia Islam's most solemn occasion. State television endlessly replayed footage of protesters celebrating in front of a burning building, interspersed with triumphalist comment from such exiled counter-revolutionaries as the People's Mujahideen Organisation—reviled by many Iranians for fighting on the Iraqis' side during the war of 1980-83—and the genial, if ineffective, elder son of the former Shah. On December 30th participants in a big government-organised rally in central Tehran demanded that Mr Mousavi and his supporters should be executed for "waging war on God".

For a while, it seemed inevitable that either Mr Mousavi or a lesser opposition figurehead, Mehdi Karroubi, would be arrested; it was even possible, as parliamentarians, rabble-rousing clerics and conservative newspaper headlines piously demanded, that they would be executed. The only conceivable reason for Mr Khamenei's failure to countenance their arrest was his fear of turning adversaries into martyrs.

In the first week of January came an admonition. Ezzatollah Sahabi, a veteran opposition figure, issued an open letter in which he warned the green movement not to slide towards "radicalism and violence". To excitable exiles who detect shades of 1978-79 in today's convulsions, he advised against unrealistic hopes: "A revolution in today's Iran", he wrote, "is neither possible nor desirable." If moderate clerics and conservatives were forced to choose between a movement of radicals and the status quo, he predicted, they would choose stability.

Mr Sahibi's letter may have sobered up the green movement. Just how much will become clear on February 11th, when opposition supporters intend to exploit the opportunity provided by official celebrations of the revolution's anniversary, and take to the streets yet again. Mr Mousavi, too, has cooled tempers by apparently going back on his earlier insistence that Mr Ahmadinejad's government was illegal, and by saying that not all the opposition's demands need to be met at once.

From an opposition perspective, Mr Khamenei's aversion to imaginative thinking among his supporters has had the advantage of encouraging his adversaries to fill the gap, which they are now doing by articulating what they want, not simply what they oppose. And for the moment, the most authoritative of those opposition voices—including the five exiles—favour a solution within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

The slipping mantle

People who know the supreme leader are unsurprised by his obduracy. He spent the eight-year presidency of Muhammad Khatami, Iran's only reformist president to date, obstructing far more innocuous measures than are now being proposed. To make concessions under pressure, the ayatollah apparently believes, is a sign less of wisdom than of weakness. So he has contented himself with vague calls for national unity, even as the *baseej* bash opposition heads and the nation's prison officers gain notoriety as rapists and torturers.

Having survived more than two decades at the top of Iran's power structure, Mr Khamenei is now looking acutely uncomfortable. By refusing to countenance a fresh election in the aftermath of the June poll, he turned much of the ire that was being directed against his president against himself. As recently as a few months ago, few Tehranis would have dared whisper "Death to Khamenei". Now that slogan has become a commonplace.

None of this means that the ayatollah is about to fall. Strikes, which ended the shah's regime, are so far confined to students boycotting exams. No one in the opposition expects quick results. In their manifesto, the five exiles foresee a lengthy period of dissent. But many Iranians remain convinced less by democracy than by traditional notions of a just ruler, empowered by divine grace and legitimised as much by his ability to keep the country together as by his innate justice. This summer, that mantle started to slip from Mr Khamenei's shoulders. It will take uncommon skill for him to stop it falling.