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## Meet Shah Ali Khamenei

By Pepe Escobar  
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Amid blood in the streets, cries in the rooftops and daggers drawn at silky corridors, the 30-year-old Islamic Revolution in Iran has a date with destiny: the challenge is to finally celebrate the marriage of Islam and democracy.

Former president Mohammad Khatami, the man of the dialogue of civilizations, revealed once again his moral stature when he praised the massive silent street protests (before the bloody repression); and stressed that almost 40 million Iranian voters, including those who dispute the final, "official" result, are "the owners" of the revolution.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on the other hand, preferred to brand the sea of protestors as "terrorists".

Khatami also brushed off the leader of the Guardians Council, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad-friendly Ahmad Jannati, as "a referee who is under suspicion and complaint". The "only solution", said Khatami, to "settle the crisis in the best interests of the Iranian people and the principles of the revolution" would be for an impartial commission to fully examine the evidence for ballot rigging. Losing presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, for his part, depicted the work of such a commission as "a given right", capable of "achieving a new type of political life in the country".

As it stands, there's no evidence the theo-political oligarchy which has just solidified its power in Iran will even contemplate the possibility of appointing such a commission.

### Montazeri to the rescue

The key move for the next few days revolves around Grand Ayatollah Husayn Montazeri's call for three days of mourning for the dead, from Wednesday to Friday. The progressive view in Tehran - and among the exiled Iranian intelligentsia - is that this is a very sophisticated, back to 1979, civil disobedience code, suggesting citizens should go indefinitely on strike.

To strike is safer, and much more subversive, than hitting the streets and being bloodied by the paramilitary Basiji. Strikes were a fundamental element for the success of the revolution 30 years ago. Montazeri is also subtly signaling the strategy to seduce Iran's silent majority - which may hover around 30% to 40% of the total population. This strategy, judiciously applied over the next few days and weeks, may expand the people power river into a formidable ocean.

It's as if an irresistible force might be whispering in his ear - "Mr Montazeri, tear down this [Islamic] wall."

Meanwhile, at street level, people power will be grieving the dead but at the same time fighting the state's implacable crackdown on all forms of modern technology by resorting to ... paper. Welcome to the 21st century return of the *samizdat* (distribution of government-suppressed literature or other media in Soviet-bloc countries).

In only one week, the green revolution, then people power, in Iran, has morphed into an entity way beyond Mousavi. The anger, rage, sense of having suffered a tremendous injustice (never underestimate this feeling in a Shi'ite society), the pent-up resentment; these emotions were so phenomenal, the regime so lost control of the arena of political debate, and the repression has been so brutal. A very simple idea underneath it all has finally revealed itself: we are fed up. You are liars. Death to the dictator. Allah-O Akbar. And we will cry every night, across our rooftops, at the top of our lungs, and we will not be silenced, until you get the message.

Blame foreign "terrorists", blame the United States, Britain, France and Germany - the theopolitical oligarchy's panicky reaction is totally beside the point. As are vast, proselytizing sectors of the Western progressive left - bound by the iron chains and faulty logic of "everyone fighting US imperialism is my friend". They have been duped - uncritically swallowing regime propaganda, blind to the complexities of Iranian society, and unable to identify a completely new political equation for what it is. To believe that "Western puppets" are crying Allah-O Akbar all over Iran's rooftops, or being shot at by Basiji in the streets, is criminally absurd.

Mousavi, Khatami, Montazeri - they are not neo-revolutionaries (much less counter-revolutionaries). They are all accepting the principles and institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Basiji, but criticizing "deviations and deceptions", in the language of Mousavi and Khatami. They want nothing else but the "return of the pure principles of the Islamic Revolution". And they are keen to stress this implies every single form of freedom of expression.

People power in Iran now dreams of a constant, no-holds-barred dialogue taking place within civil society. And this step ahead does not necessarily have to do with Iran adopting Western liberal democracy. Persians are way too sophisticated; the whole thing goes way, way beyond. It's as if a road map was being laid out not only for Iran's post-modern remix of the French Revolution, but for Islam's Reformation as well. This is as serious as it gets.

### **Rafsanjani's Qom game**

Meanwhile, mundane palace intrigue goes on. Not surprisingly, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani's whole game is taking place in Qom. He may not co-opt the IRGC - which fears and hates him - but he may well unbalance many an influential ayatollah and have a go at

illegitimizing Khamenei. Niceties apart, it goes without saying that the supreme leader's entourage has told Rafsanjani that if he keeps on scheming, he and his whole family will land in deep trouble.

Qom is being microscopically monitored by the supremacist Khamenei Leader/Ahmadinejad/IRGC faction. They all know that many important ayatollahs have traditionally promoted their leadership as vehicles for wider social grievances. The "papacy" in Qom supports mostly pragmatic conservatives and reformists. People like Mousavi and Khatami. Definitely not people like Ahmadinejad.

The widow of Mohammad Rajai, a former prime minister assassinated in the beginning of the revolution, went to Qom to talk to some key ayatollahs. Not surprisingly, she was arrested. According to the informed Iranian blogosphere, there are quite a few ayatollahs under house arrest and practically incommunicado. It's easy to forget in the West that millions of Iranians do not fundamentally agree with political power submitted to religion. Public pronouncements of ayatollahs in favor of the separation of church and state may not be too far away.

Rafsanjani wants an emergency session of the 86 clerics-strong, no women, Council of Experts. Another crucial point: Qom as a whole is also not very fond of Khamenei. Khamenei was and remains an ultra-minor scholar; he was a mere *hojjatoleslam* when, through a white coup, he was installed as the late ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's successor. He's not a revered *marja* (senior spiritual leader) or a source of imitation.

The problem is Rafsanjani is fighting a formidable foe - the apocalypst, Mahdist Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor who lost influence to - who else? - Rafsanjani in the last election for the Council of Experts, in late 2006. So this, once again, is an (invisible) battle between the "shark" and the "crocodile", as Rafsanjani and Yazdi, respectively, are known in Iran. Al-Arabiya is relying on sources according to which Rafsanjani is trying to come up with a collective leadership to replace the supreme leader. No Iranian blogger has confirmed the possible emergence of an ayatollah politburo.

### **Meet Shah Ali Khamenei**

For now, the theo-political oligarchy (Khamenei/Ahmadinejad/IRGC) that has solidified its power and privilege has made it abundantly clear it wants an Islamic government where popular sovereignty is reduced to zero. The divine legitimacy of power is self-sufficient. That's the meaning of Khamenei's speech last Friday. This oligarchy won't let go of their power - not by a long shot.

But amid all the crackle and static coming out of Iran, one thing is certain. It's too late to turn back now. All the evidence points out to people power hanging in for the long haul, no matter how desperately violent the scruffy working-class Basiji, despised by the Iranian-educated, urban middle and upper middle class, behave. The key message will remain simple and modest. And cracks at the top are bound to emerge.

The other option is an illegitimate, brutal military dictatorship of a (fractured) mullahtariat, supported by legions of Basiji. This arrangement can't possibly last.

There are insistent rumors in Tehran that the theo-political oligarchy supremacists are receiving crack counter-insurgency help from both Russia and China.

Khamenei/Ahmadinejad/IRGC can always insist on turning Tehran into Tiananmen and prevail - for now. But Iran in 2009 has nothing to do with China in 1989.

As for Mousavi, hurled in spite of himself into the eye of this historic hurricane, he now follows the human flow. The human flow has indicated that the supreme leader is illegitimate. His credibility as a religious scholar was and remains shaky. Now his credibility as supreme leader is shaky as well.

Khamenei's central thesis of *velayat-e-faqih* (the rule of jurisprudence) was never a divine revelation (by the way, it was influenced by Khomeini's reading of human, oh-so-human Plato and Aristotle). It's just a particular Shi'ite interpretation of political Islam, according to which an Islamic jurist has divine powers and rules absolutely surrounded by guardians. (Influential ayatollahs in Najaf, for instance, simply don't buy it).

Now people are saying, "We have had enough of guardians". And they're also saying that the answer, my friend, is blowing in the rooftops. That's what people power is collectively thinking: if God is great, he's got to allow us democracy within Islam. As for the supreme leader, he is now naked. Mousavi may not be Khomeini. But Khamenei increasingly is remixing himself as the shah.