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Iran's streets are lost, but hope returns

By Pepe Escobar
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PARIS - The angel of history lives in Iran - even though Manichean progressives of all stripes, especially in the United States, insist on believing the overwhelming popular uprising in Iran is nothing but one more US Central Intelligence Agency-engineered "color" revolution.

Confronted with this, Iranian journalists and the diaspora in Paris, including people just arriving from Tehran, are puzzled: how hard is it to understand, they say, that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has in fact ceased to be an arbiter and has legitimized a coup, steering the regime towards totalitarianism, striking off "republic" from "Islamic Republic" and, in a Brechtian twist, virtually abolishing the people?

As an Iranian businessman who goes back and forth between Tehran and Paris puts it, "People in the West don't seem to understand that the political struggle in Iran is not about liberals versus conservatives, but conservatives against a fascist tendency uniting some sectors of the clergy, and this state within the state which are the Pasdaran [IRGC - Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps]. Both the nuclear program and the missiles are under the control of the Pasdaran. And who are they? They are former fighters in the Iran-Iraq war [of the 1980s], the religious police ... They control everything, they have informants in every building, every street, every neighborhood, like the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s."

Mir Hossein Mousavi, hurled by the breakneck pace of events to the status of channel for the angel of history (in spite of himself), refuses to go away - even if he has done the unthinkable (in Islamic Republic terms): to challenge the supreme leader in public. Ali Larijani, former nuclear negotiator, supreme leader protege, is wavering; he has accused the Guardians Council of bias towards re-elected President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. The Council of Experts, in the holy city of Qom, may be wavering. But Paris-based Iranian journalists don't believe former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, although hyper-connected, would have enough votes to at least force an investigation of the actions of the supreme leader, who has peppered the council with his own proteges.

The all-powerful IRGC is definitely not wavering. It obeys to the hilt the directives of General Ali Jafari, the former head of the IRGC Strategic Studies Center, the man put in charge by the supreme leader in 2007 to crack the code of possible Western-engineered color revolutions. The special, anti-riot al-Zahra and Ashura brigades, mixed with the paramilitary Basiji, simply took over the streets. The repression is massive. Newly arrived Iranians confirm one can't even breathe in the capital.

Noted commentator Masoud Behnoud, in his blog, can't bring himself to fire off his customary darts of irony. He writes, "The Council of Guardians could have played a role to stop the degradation of the situation. The problem is everything depends on Ayatollah [Ahmad] Jannati, its president. Well, he follows for more than 20 years now the road map of the fundamentalist right." Iranian cartoonist Nikahang Kowsar reads the popular mind immortalizing the 2009 Iranian remix of China's crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Khamenei, the new Saddam

Mohsen Sazegara, president of the Washington-based Research Institute for Contemporary Iran, was one of the founders of the IRGC, in the earliest stages after the 1979 revolution. He does not mince his words. For him, Khamenei "made the biggest mistake of his life"; "he thought that with the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Interior he could conquer a nation". Sazegara stresses, "for the first time in 120 years, Iranians mobilize themselves without religious help and with no religious motivation".

As for the regime's repression machine, he points out that "those who kill the protesters, those we call the 'white shirts', are Revolutionary Guards, they belong to a special brigade of the intelligence division [he's referring to the above-mentioned Ashura brigade]. They look like civilians, but they have knives, iron bars and weapons".

Sazegara qualifies the nearly 120,000 Revolutionary Guards as "an army, an intelligence service and a huge enterprise. Khamenei marginalized some of the founders and war heroes and replaced them with underlings". It's hard to estimate how popular the IRGC really is. Sazegara heard insistent rumors on the arrest of seven generals. One of his friends, also a general, told him the majority of the IRGC, does not agree with what many Iranians are branding as "the coup".

Sazegara insists Khamenei's regime "is already security obsessed and militarized. There's no turning back for such a brutal regime. For last Friday's prayers, he mobilized his supporters all over the country. I was expecting to see 500,000 people, but according to our friends, there were no more than 50,000. Many of his partisans remain neutral, or are ashamed. If he manages to repress the Iranian people, he'll become a military dictator like Saddam Hussein. He'll be the king of a cemetery."

Reza Baraheni, author of *Les Mysteres de Mon Pays* (The Mysteries of My Country), published this year in France, feels that the confrontation between the government and the people gives him an impression of déjà vu. But he's optimistic; "A generation of sons face off against a generation of fathers. Just as the previous generation took power off the hands of the Shah, it won't be long before the Islamic power goes to those who oppose it. The solutions to similar problems are not always identical. But the cruelty of both regimes is identical - as well as their incapacity to assimilate the modernity embodied by democracy, and their fear of a different future for them and for the country they control."

Philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo, from the University of Toronto, frames the crisis as rooted "between the popular thirst for democratization of state and society and the conservative reaction". Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi believed that "the Islamic nomenklatura would leave some place for reform". And yet, "the protesters are not revolutionaries. These young people remind us that a monolithic image of the country does not necessarily reflect the state of mind of the 70% of the population that is less than 30 years old. The fracture between state and people has never been greater".

So this is a "political fight between the republican nature of Iran and its religious oligarchy. The republican instinct consists in paying almost exclusive attention to the legitimacy of public space, while the religious establishment refuses to concede a minimum of legitimacy to the judgment of public opinion". That's why "Iran is immersed in a crisis of legitimacy without precedent in its political history."

Azadeh Kian, professor of sociology at the University of Paris VII, stresses the composition of Mousavi's electoral front: "They belong to the structured social groups, notably the middle classes, workers, traders and entrepreneurs who suffer, more than others, the consequences of a soaring monopolization of the economy for political ends, of an inflation between 27% and 30%, of a huge unemployment rate (between 30% and 50% amidst the young, according to estimates), and the flight of Iranian and foreign capital. No jobs are being created for the 800,00 young people who enter the Iranian job market every year".

Kian points out how "many economists, including two former directors of the Central Bank who had resigned", are sure that "Ahmadinejad has ruined the country". He squandered all the reserves accumulated during the Khatami presidency; some as handouts for the poor, while his machine recruited masses of rural, unemployed youngsters for the Basiji.

For Kian, "conservatives, and their base in the traditional middle classes, the grand bazaaris and the majority of Qom clerics, they are not allied with the president anymore". Newly arrived Iranians corroborate it, insisting Ahmadinejad will have a very rough ride.

The agony of illegitimacy

Journalist Nairi Nahapetian, author of *Qui a tue l'Ayatollah Kanooni?* (Who killed Ayatollah Kannoni?), hints at what strategies may lie ahead, stressing, "An educated, largely urban population, in a country with efficient infrastructure, continues to live under an Islamic law, sometimes mocking it and always finding a way around it, including in the fringes that are not part of the Westernized bourgeoisie."

He makes it clear: "Since the early 20th century, Iran faces important movements of popular revolt every 30 to 40 years. In 1906-1911, it was a constitutional revolution. In 1951, under [premier Mohammad] Mossadegh, it was the aborted attempt to nationalize oil. In 1979, the toppling of the shah, perceived as a US puppet. It's as if every generation tried at a particular time to take the destiny of the country in its hands, and the management of the oil revenues in particular."

Nahapetian inevitably blasts "Ahmadinejad's policy of massive subventions to pacify the popular classes". He says he "increased an already uncontrollable inflation and did nothing to reduce the Iranian economy's dependency of oil".

The Iranian intelligentsia and those commuting from Tehran are unanimous: the legitimacy of

the regime as a whole is in play. The regime can't allow the genie of democracy to get out of the lamp, for it would open a Pandora's box of dreams.

And people power may have lost the street - facing a massive repression machine; but people are not afraid anymore. They believe another Iran is possible. All hopes lie on a protracted, creative, subversive, underground and parallel movement of civil disobedience, with strikes and mourning ceremonies, up and down, with lulls and crescendos.

The 1978/1979 Iranian revolution lasted, back to back, roughly one year. The seeds of the next one have already been planted. The angel of history silently surveys it all.