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## A classic revolutionary dilemma

By Dilip Hiro  
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By marshalling the regime's coercive instruments, Iran's 70-year-old Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has, for now, succeeded in curbing the popular, peaceful challenge to the authenticity of Iran's fateful June 12 presidential election. But he has paid a heavy political price.

Before his June 19 hardline speech at a Friday prayer congregation, Khamenei had the mystique of a just arbiter of authority, perched on a lofty platform far above the contentiousness of day-to-day politics. In his sermon, he asserted the validity of the [re-election](#) of Mahmud Ahmadinejad while the Guardians Council, the constitutional body charged with validating any national election, was still dealing with 646 complaints about possible election misbehavior and fraud. As a result, he damaged his status as a just ruler, a matter of grave importance since justice is a vital element in Islamic values.

Furthermore, by boycotting the June 19 congregation, former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, as well as Mahdi Karrubi, former speaker of the Iranian parliament - all of them respected mullahs - exposed a deep rift in the ruling religious establishment. That bodes ill for the future of the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei has won the immediate battle, but the conflict between hardliners and reformists is far from over. Taking a long-term view, Khamenei and his hardline cohorts face a superhuman task of countering an inexorably rising trend. Quite simply, the demographic make-up of Iran favors their reformist adversaries.

A glance at the republic's history bears this out.

### Two decades of revolution

Between 1979, the year of the Islamic revolution, and 1999, Iran's population doubled to 65 million, two-thirds of them under 25 years of age. Those young Iranians had no direct experience or memory of the pre-Islamic regime of the shah - its inequities and injustices, and

its subservient relationship with Washington. Therefore, their commitment to the Islamic regime was less than total. Moreover, the post-revolutionary educational system had proven inadequate when it came to socializing them the way the republic's religious leaders wanted.

During those two decades, Iran's student body increased almost threefold, to 19 million. The overall literacy rate jumped from 58% to 82%, with the figure for females - 28% in 1979 - tripling. There was a remarkable upsurge in the enrollment of women in universities. Nationally, their share of university student bodies shot up to 60%. At prestigious Tehran University, they were a majority in all faculties, including science and law.

The total of university graduates, which stood at 430,000 in 1979, grew nine-fold in those years. As elsewhere in the world, university students and graduates would become a vital engine for change.

Much to the disappointment of the mullahs, a study of university students in the late 1990s showed that whereas 83% of them watched television, only 5% watched religious programs. Of the 58% who read extracurricular books, barely 6% showed interest in religious literature.

In his book, *A Study of Student Political Behavior in Today's Iran*, Professor Majid Muhammadi divided university students into three categories: those born into largely Islamic working or traditional middle-class households (traders and craftsmen); those born to secular, or nominally Islamic, modern middle class parents (teachers and doctors); and those raised in an environment that mixed traditional Islam and secularism.

While the first category was loyal to the regime, and the second kept a low profile, shunning politics, it was the students in the last, and largest, category who felt deeply conflicted. While linked to Islam through tradition, they were attracted to modern, Westernized culture politically and socially. In attempting to resolve the conflict, most of them became politically active, and were transformed into a force for social and political change.

By and large, university students were interested in watching foreign television programs, finding the national channels unimaginative and propagandistic. A poorly enforced ban on satellite dishes meant they could easily get access to the BBC, CNN, and the Voice of America. In the post-1999 decade, the arrival of the Internet, e-mail, blogging, YouTube, Facebook, and most recently Twitter, opened up opportunities previously not available to their older peers.

Irrespective of their social backgrounds, what indisputably impinges on the daily lives of university students and other young Iranians are the restrictions the regime tries to impose on their social and personal freedoms, including going to mixed-sex parties, holding hands with someone other than a marriage partner, drinking alcoholic beverages, listening to modern Western music, watching foreign television channels via satellite, and having extramarital sex. While reformists recognize that restricting such activities is having the singular effect of alienating the young from the Islamic Republic, their conservative opponents consider these restrictions essential to uphold Islamic morality and culture.

Not surprisingly, politically conscious university students have been striving to enlarge the arena of personal freedoms as a means of countering social repression and administrative corruption, and making the Islamic system more transparent and accountable.

### **Politics in command**

It was against this background that, in 1997, a presidential election was conducted. Muhammad Khatami, a reformist outsider, unblemished by corruption, proceeded to trounce his rival, Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri - the erstwhile speaker of parliament favored by the religious establishment and perceived to be corrupt - by a margin of almost three to one. In the [next election](#), Khatami trumped his nearest rival by a five-to-one margin.

Notwithstanding periodic setbacks due to a dispersion of power among the office of president, the parliament, and the judiciary, Khatami created an environment in which the area of social, cultural, and political freedoms expanded.

Initially, for instance, the authorities were very strict about enforcing the wearing of the *hijab* (a head-covering scarf) and banning the use of make-up for women, nor did they allow young men and women to sit in the same classrooms in colleges and universities. By the time of Khatami's reelection in 2005, however, the authorities were tolerating young women who flouted the strict Islamic dress code of covering themselves fully, except for face and hands. They even allowed an occasional rock concert and they were giving more leeway to non-governmental organizations.

During the first year of Khatami's presidency, the country experienced an explosion of new publications. Following a landslide victory by the reformists in the first round of parliamentary elections in February 2000, a newly bullish pro-reform press even began publishing stories of corruption in the pre-Khatami period. These proved immensely popular.

Khatami's supporters viewed this as a sign of the growing maturity of the Islamic system and the evolution of democratic governance. Before the second round of the elections could take place in May, however, a conservative-minded parliament reacted speedily. Encouraged by Khamenei, it stiffened the Press Law in April, leading to the closure of dozens of publications by the judiciary.

In the 2005 presidential contest, leading reformists were barred from the race by the Guardians Council. Deprived of real choice, most reformist voters boycotted the election. This enabled the hardline mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad - a Khamenei favorite - to trounce Rafsanjani, an affluent, pragmatic conservative blemished by a reputation for corruption.

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, university classes were re-segregated by gender. The law banning satellite dishes was enforced vigorously. The morality [police](#) resorted to patrolling the streets to ensure that women wore proper Islamic dress and unmarried couples refrained from holding hands. This was but a part of Ahmadinejad's drive to return society to the early years of the Islamic revolution.

Little wonder then that, in the run-up to the 2009 presidential election, young voters rallied behind Mir Hussein Mousavi, whose academic wife, the artist Zahra Rahnavard, spoke of the *hijab* becoming optional for women. Mousavi promised to disband the morality police and appoint women to important government jobs.

### **The nature of the Iranian Revolution**

In trying to recreate the environment of the early days of the Iranian revolution in the absence of the conditions that brought about the collapse of the old order of the shah, the country's hard line leaders are defying both human nature and history.

They are ignoring the fact that most people tend to strive only to the extent that is necessary to survive, procreate, and lead a comfortable life. More important, human beings simply cannot continue functioning at a heightened level for decades on end. Revolutions are born out of periods of acute crisis and extraordinary fervor combined with high idealism. With time, red hot zeal cools, and so does a revolution. Idealism gives way to pragmatism - and, of course, corruption.

No less than the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, bowed to inescapable reality when he accepted a [United Nations](#)-brokered ceasefire with Iraq in 1988, after endlessly exhorting Iranians to fight on for 20 years - until victory.

Such softening is common to all revolutions.

Yet in the regional context, what happened in Iran in the late 1970s had been unique. Every previous post-World War II dramatic regime change in the Middle East had come about thanks to overnight [military](#) coups. The overthrow of the seemingly unassailable Shah of Iran in February 1979, on the other hand, was the culmination of a relentless two-year-long revolutionary movement.

Globally, too, the Iranian revolution stood apart. All the revolutions of the last century, starting with the Mexican revolution of 1910, were secular and focused on changing property and class relations. Not the one in Iran.

Its leader, Khomeini, made adroit use of Shi'ite history and Iranian nationalism to attract ever-increasing support. He managed to unite the disparate anti-shah forces, both religious and secular - including Marxists of various shades - by his most radical demand: the deposition of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Although his revolutionary movement included secularists, only the religious segment was capable, via the mosque, of providing a national organizational network down to the village level.

Both as an institution and a place of congregation, the mosque proved critical. Since the state could not suppress the mosque in a country that was 98% Muslim, it offered a sanctuary to the revolutionary movement. That was why Khomeini instructed the clergy to base the Revolutionary Komitehs (committees) coordinating the anti-shah movement in those mosques.

It was in this way that the unprecedented upheaval, claiming an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 lives (largely unarmed Iranians killed by military gunfire), turned into the successful "Islamic revolution". It became a preamble to the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. That term "republic" - not "state" or "emirate" (as in the Islamic Emirate of [Afghanistan](#) under the Taliban) - in the official title was, and remains, highly significant. Thirty years on, the partisans of Mousavi are now arguing that the recent [electoral](#) fraud undermines the founding principle of the post-shah regime: that power lies with the public.

Overthrowing an established order is a hard, bloody affair, but making a revolution stick is even more demanding. In the case of Iran, the revolutionary regime became a target of aggression when Iraq's Saddam Hussein launched his invasion in September 1980. The subsequent eight-year war helped merge Iranian nationalism into the post-shah regime, and stabilized it.

Following Khomeini's death in 1989, the transition to his successor Khamenei as the supreme leader, assisted by the popularly elected president Rafsanjani, was smooth. Initially, Khamenei took his cues from Rafsanjani, a wily politician. As he consolidated his hold over the military, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and its auxiliary, the Basiji militia, however, he began operating independently and drifted away from Rafsanjani.

Now, both hardliners and reformists are competing to show their loyalty to Shi'ite Islam. Its founder, Imam Hussein, the Great Martyr, leading a band of 72 retainers, died in 680 AD while battling a force of 4,000 to stake his rightful claim to the caliphate usurped by his rival. The moral of this episode, which lies at the heart of Shi'ite Islam, is that the true believer must not shirk from challenging the established order if it has become unjust and oppressive.

### **Competing loyalties to Shi'ite Islam**

In today's Shi'ite Iran, the partisans of Mousavi have adopted green, the color of Islam, as their brand. They shout "Allah-u Akbar" (God is Great) and "We want [Imam] Hussein" in the streets and from the rooftops, while their leader invokes the Koran to demand justice. They are not demanding regime change, only an overdue change in the regime.

For his part, Khamenei sees the hand of God in the overwhelming victory of Ahmadinejad. The riot police and Basiji militia regard him as their spiritual guide and consider any challenge to his word or deed as a challenge to Islam. Ignoring massive evidence to the contrary, Khamenei has ruled out an electoral fraud on the grounds that such a possibility is inconceivable in Iran's Islamic system.

While locked in a struggle, both sides claim to be pursuing the ideal of a just Islamic state. Each remains aware of the value of martyrdom.

The Iranian security forces' beatings, baton charges, and tear-gassing of unarmed, peaceful protestors, as well as mass arrests, are deplorable. It is worth noting that most of the firing of live ammunition by the security personnel seems to have been in the air. That explains why the fatalities in the massive and repeated street protests in Tehran have remained relatively low, totaling 15, according to official sources, which also claim that eight Basiji militiamen have been killed. Media reports generally have cited 17 deaths of protestors so far, though rumors of higher death tolls abound.

What matters most to the government, as well as its opponents, is the number of people killed, or "martyred".

The speed with which the authorities have tried to hijack the killing of 26-year-old Neda Aghan Soltan in Tehran by a bullet almost certainly fired by a uniformed member of the security forces is illustrative. They have declared her to be a Basiji martyr, allegedly killed by pro-Mousavi protestors, who, in response, rushed to circulate worldwide the shocking image of her dying in the street.

Given its Shi'ite underpinning, the government remains conscious that resorting to excessive violence could turn opponents into that most dangerous of symbols: martyrs.

Until the June 12 election - despite evidence of modest tinkering with the first round of the 2005 presidential vote - post-shah Iran seemed to indicate that Islam and democracy could

work in harmony. The upheaval since then has demonstrated that when strains between the two concepts develop, it is democracy that gets short shrift.

That is bad news for Muslims - and non-Muslims - worldwide.