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Iran's holiest City: Qom all ye faithful

Muted dissent in Iran's holiest city

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AT FIRST glance the holy city of Qom, Iran's pre-eminent place of Shia scholarship, still feels pretty conservative. Almost all its women are covered from head to toe. Mullahs saunter by in flowing brown robes. The seminaries are packed with earnest young students, steeped in the values of the Islamic Revolution.

Moreover, the city is home to many of the *baseej* militiamen who have beaten and killed demonstrators in Tehran, 160km (100 miles) to the north. No demonstrations have taken place in Qom or nearby villages since the disputed presidential election of June 12th. "We can't do anything," says a jobless 26-year-old university graduate. Like many of his friends, he did not bother to vote, though he complains that the government "isn't working". Since the poll, security has tightened. Foreigners are routinely held for questioning. Locals say there are informers round every corner. Unlicensed television satellite dishes have been confiscated. Codes banning unmarried couples from consorting in public are rigorously upheld.

Yet even here, you meet people who sympathise with the clutch of Qom's senior clergy who have spoken out against the ruling establishment. The discontent is aired quietly, behind closed doors. Under a veneer of calm and unity, you detect splits: between the generations; between the pious and the more secular; between those who listen or have access to the Western media and those who rely on state news. Qom has been infiltrated by the same forces of modernisation that have transformed other big cities. In the shadow of

Qom's gold-domed Holy Shrine, second in importance in Iran only to the one in Meshed, shops hawk garish women's clothes; in the past, it was illegal to sell even T-shirts. Drugs and alcohol can be found easily if you know where to look. Qom even has its own well-known red-light district, where pious mullahs can get licences to be married just for a few hours or a day to a pretty woman in a custom that is close to abetting prostitution.

Still, many young Qomsters feel suffocated—and head north to breathe more freely and to look for work in Tehran. The strength is sapped out of any fledgling open opposition. In any case, liberalism in Qom is relative. Most supporters of Mir Hosein Mousavi, the thwarted presidential contender, still express respect for the controversial incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, because the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has thrown his weight behind him. "Imam Khamenei is so great," says a local teacher. "I trust him completely, and if he says President Ahmadinejad has been doing a good job, then I believe him."

By contrast, in many other places, especially in the northern suburbs of Tehran, many Iranians lambast Mr Khamenei himself for the crackdown against people publicly disputing the election's official result. In Qom, no one, it seems, openly questions his authority. Mullahs in the city's many mosques loudly extol his and the government's view. At Friday prayers, ayatollahs rail against the supposed influence of the West in Iran's affairs and castigate America for its evil deeds.

At a 1,400-year-old mosque hidden in a warren of alleys, worshippers rush to the regime's defence. "Our current problems are all because of foreign agents like the BBC," says a 60-year-old veteran of the Iran-Iraq war. "The protesters have no right to demonstrate. They are criminal rioters."

The fervour of such worshippers is intense. Supporters of Mr Mousavi had the nerve to pepper the bazaar with his picture. But Mr Ahmadinejad's people soon defaced the posters, in one case knocking a hole in the wall where Mr Mousavi's smiling face had been displayed. Those in Qom who would like to protest are pinning their hopes on like-minded comrades in Tehran keeping up their defiance.