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The Iranian lesson

By Amr Elchoubaki

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The numerous mishaps that overshadowed Iranian elections made it clear that some things need to change in that country. One is the unbelievably autocratic response of the regime to the opposition. There is a deep crisis of government in Iran, a crisis that goes beyond the elections and beyond anything Ahmadinejad says or does.

The main problem, I believe, is the contrast between the immense powers of the Supreme Guide, who is basically a clergyman, and the president, who is elected.

I don't think that the current protests are going to bring down the Iranian regime, but they shed light on its worst dilemma; namely the extensive power of the mullahs, or the clergy. The clergymen, respectable scholars and elected officials as they are, have their limitations. And these limitations are becoming clearer as time goes by.

Those who want to create clergy-based governments in the Arab world better learn from the Iranian lesson. You may recall that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in its political programme, suggested that legislation be supervised by a committee of *ulema*, or clergy. Judging by what is happening in Iran today, this is a bad idea.

The Iranian Revolution is 30 years old already, which means that most Iranians under 40 have but vague memories of it. When Khamenei dies, it would be hard for the Iranians to bow to the power of the next Supreme Guide. Khamenei derives his mandate from the fact that he was part of the revolution. The mandate -- and the revolution that brought it into existence -- is soon becoming a thing of the past.

The extensive power of the Supreme Guide will have to be ditched, for it impinges on the power of the country's elected leader. If Iran wants to keep the post of the Supreme Guide in place, it will have to trim its powers. Iranian Supreme Guides, like European kings in the 19th century, will have to learn how to live well and say less.

I see a future Iran in which the president's power eclipses that of the Supreme Guide. I see a second republic coming to life in Iran. When? That's the question.