

Political crisis in Iran

by Yassamine Mather

In the last few weeks, demonstrators in Iran have shouted a slogan which is a variation on one used during the demonstrations prior to the February uprising in 1979: The slogan, which rhymes in Farsi, is *Taleban Taleban haya kon, Iran ra raha Kon*, which means *Taleban, Taleban have shame; leave Iran alone*. Taleban is reference to the more conservative faction of the Islamic regime.

Four and a half months after the murder of Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar by what was clearly an Islamic murder squad, three months after the admission by the ministry of information that officers and employees of the ministry were responsible for these and may be other murders, it is still not clear who has been arrested, who gave the order for these murders, which faction of the regime thought it would benefit from this

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A catalogue of mishaps

A review of the events of the last few months looks more like a list of unbelievable mishaps for the Iran's Islamic Regime. (This list, except for the last two items, is from information compiled by Iran Human Rights Working Group):

November 22: Dariush Forouhar and Parvaneh Eskandari-Forouhar, the leaders of the nationalist Iran Nation Party, were found stabbed to death in their house in Tehran.

November 25: The body of Majid Sharif, a writer who had been critical of the Islamic Republic, was found after he had been reported missing since November 22. The coroner's office claimed he had died of a heart attack.

December 9: The bodies of two other writers who were actively seeking to revive the Writers Association in Iran, Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Ja'afar Pouyandeh, were found in the streets of Tehran. Mokhtari had been reported missing since December 4. Both bodies bore strangulation marks and in Mokhtari's case the coroners' office announced the official cause of death as strangulation. Mokhtari was among a group of six writers who were questioned by an Islamic revolutionary court in October and warned against reviving the banned Writers Association.

Two other dissidents, Pirouz Davani and Rostam Hamedani have been reported missing. Davani, a writer/activist who led the group United Left, disappeared after publishing a bulletin criticizing the IRI. He has been missing since last August, and is

feared to be dead. Last November, 88 political figures in Iran petitioned President Khatami to order an investigation of Davani's disappearance. Hamedani, a political activist and an ally of Davani, was reported missing by the newspaper Iran in its December 13 issue.

On January 5, under intense pressure from the public and the press, the Information Ministry announced that the murders were carried out by several of its own agents "acting on their own" or as agents of foreign powers. The number of agents arrested was put at ten. On January 20, Mohammad Niazi, a prosecutor of the Tehran military tribunal, announced that the arrested agents would be tried publicly. As of this date, however, IRI officials have neither made public the identities nor the positions of those arrested. On February 14, it was announced that "more" arrests had been made, but no specific details were given. On February 22 Niazi said that four more suspects were arrested, but again no details were provided.

On February 9, Qorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi, the Minister of Intelligence who for weeks had resisted calls for his resignation, finally agreed to step down from his post. He was replaced a few days later by Ali Yunesi, a cleric who was formerly head of the Tehran Revolutionary Court.

January 23: Some of the people who had taken part in a rally commemorating of the 40th day since the deaths of Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Pouyandeh, were beaten up by the police. Among them were the relatives of the writers.

January 24: According to the Staff Secretary of the Restoration of Enjoin the Good and Forbid the Evil, a prison project for Mashhad will eliminate emotional and behavioural problems of the prisoners. In this project "the prisoners will be subject to ideological remedies to cure their psychological and behavioural abnormalities".

January 25: A sound bomb was thrown at the offices of the Khordad daily newspaper, injuring two staff members. One staff member said that an unknown caller had threatened to bomb the daily again with a "real bomb". The newspaper had been launched on December 3 by Abdollah Nouri, the former Minister of the Interior who was impeached by the Majlis.

January 31: Deputy Minister for the Press, Ahmad Borghani, resigned from his post. In his farewell speech he criticised the campaign against the freedom of expression, saying that "young trees have shot up,

but there are apparently people who are determined to cut them off at the roots". During his tenure the number of publications doubled reaching 1,300, and the circulation rate of the country's press increased to 2.3 million copies per day.

February 11: Hadi Khamenei, brother of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, was attacked and beaten up in the Mohammadiéh mosque in Qom as he was preparing to give a speech. It is believed that he was beaten by religious hardliners. Rasul Montajabnia, a close associate of Hadi Khamenei, was also beaten up. A week later, it was announced that 45 people were arrested in connection with the attack.

On February 18, there were reports of unrest in the town of Jajarm, in Northeastern Iran. A number of public buildings and banks were apparently sacked. The unrest followed a decision by the ministry of interior to amalgamate Jajarm with a smaller town, Garmeh, to form a single municipal council for the upcoming local elections.

January 23: the daily newspaper Zan, run by Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of ex-president Rafsanjani, was ordered closed from January 24 to February 7 by a Tehran court. The charge was defaming the police security chief, General Mohammad Naghdi. The daily had accused him of participating in an attack on former vice president Abdollah Nouri and Minister of Culture Mohajerani. Zan was exonerated of the above charges, but it was found guilty of printing a reader's letter in which she had defamed the investigators into the recent killings by asking "Why has Mr. Khatami sent the wolf after the ewe." The court also sentenced Hashemi to a fine of \$500.

March 10: Mohammad Reza Naqdi and 10 members of his staff are to stand trial this May on charges of torturing Tehran city officials arrested last year on corruption charges. The court will hear charges of mistreatment filed against the suspects by a number of officials who were detained in connection with a corruption scandal in the Tehran city government. The allegations of torture, raised during the trial of the capital's former moderate mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi, were only shocking in that for the first time a faction of the regime admitted that torture was used by the military police.

April 6: The paper Zan is closed down.

Although it is not unusual for dictatorships to use death squads in order to silence their opponents, the admission of such tactics is surprising, even by the standards of the Islamic regime. However this admission, the arrest of officers, albeit junior ones, from the intelligence police, all point to a crisis at the highest levels of the Islamic regime. The admission regarding what the government called "rogue elements" within the ministry of intelligence was not voluntary; it was made because there were so many leaks from inside the regime both to opponents abroad

and to newspapers in Iran that the story couldn't be kept quiet any more.

What we have seen is a compromise between the two factions of the regime to find the least damaging way of trying to come out of a terrible mess. The dilemma for Khatami and his supporters is that civil society marks the end of political Islam. Whatever happens to the Iranian regime, fundamentalism has come to the end of the road. Maybe Islamic leaders will live to regret slogans promising economic prosperity for the poor and the Iran-Iraq war. Both event mark the disillusionment of the majority of the population with religious government.

Poverty, cynicism about religious state and high birth rates encouraged during the war have all brought major socio-political changes in Iranian society. Irangate tarnished the image of a pure Islamic leadership fighting the "evil US". The rampant corruption of the post-war years, when corruption under president Rafsanjani allowed a few officials to accumulate huge fortunes at the expense of the "dispossessed", left the gap between the rich and poor wider than ever before in Iran.

The problem for the Iranian clergy is that the majority of the population remember the idealist egalitarian slogans of the war years, while the leadership has moved on to become the new elite. Today 75 per cent of the population is below 25, with high rates of literacy, high levels of unemployment, and a worsening economic crisis. This is inevitably challenging the very essence of an Islamic Republic. The election of June 1997 (heralded by some in Iran as the Khordad revolution, Khordad is the name of the month) should be seen primarily as a vote against Nategh Nouri, the candidate of the clergy and the Vali Faghih Khamneii, rather than a vote for Khatami. Of 284 Islamic candidates, 4 were allowed to be nominated; the least fundamentalist of these candidates was Khatami.

Who is Iran's new president?

Khatami's principle advantage compared to previous Islamic leaders is his realisation that old ideas and methods will not work that in order to survive the Islamic regime has to reform itself. Of course he has other advantages, e.g. he can do joined-up writing, unlike previous leaders of the Islamic regime who were notorious for their lack of any form of education apart from memorising the Koran. Khatami is from a clerical family and received traditional clerical training at the seminary in Qom. Just before the Islamic revolution of 1979 he was picked to run the Iranian-sponsored Islamic Center in Hamburg, where he had his first direct contact with the West and learned some German. Until 1992, when he was sent into internal political wilderness, he held ministerial positions in the Islamic Republic for ten years as minister of culture. During most of this period, which coincided with the consolidation of the new regime, Khatami went along

with repressive policies: books were systematically censored and some book publishers had their licenses revoked. Khatami reinstated annual awards for the best books, and established a press arbitration council to deal with complaints against the journals. In 1992, the more fundamentalist faction in the parliament forced Khatami out of the cultural ministry, claiming his policies towards books, film, and the press were too liberal.

Khatami spent the next five years as head of the National Library. During this time he wrote two books in Persian, both collections of essays originally delivered as lectures to university students. The first, *Fear of the Wave*, consists of essays on Shi'ite Islamic reformist thinkers-men whom Khatami admires for attempting to reinterpret Islam in ways that address problems of the modern world. The second, *From the World of the City to the City of the World*, is a long essay on Western political thought from Plato and Aristotle to Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. It concludes with an account of the age of liberalism which, in Khatami's telling, these political philosophers made possible. He is drawn to Western political philosophy, fascinated by St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli and Hobbes, Voltaire and Locke. These men have provided Western civilization with the kind of political ideas that he believes are lacking in Islamic thought. Khatami finds in Locke the strongest expression of political thought in the West in the modern era – but it isn't clear how Khatami reconciles this with fundamental pillars of the Islamic order in Iran, the notion of *Velayat Faghih* (Guardian of people) who can over rule every one and remains the sole ultimate power. Locke is the advocate of limited, constitutional government based on the consent of the governed, who must be granted individual rights. Locke is a tolerant religious man but believes in the separation of Church and State, and the primacy of government over religion however Khatami prides himself in supporting an Islamic Republic and has never called for the separation of state and religion. It is said that Khatami is also greatly influenced by Harold Laski's *The Rise of European Liberalism*, and indeed Khatami quotes Laski extensively.

Who are Khatami's constituents? His supporters include (1) the Students of the Imam's Line (the group that organised the siege of the US embassy in Tehran during the 1979 revolution), still for state intervention in economy although Khatami is for privatisations, previously pro-Moscow; (2) the Association of Combatant Clerics, for state intervention in economics; (3) the intellectual Islamic movement – Soroush, Nouri, Mohajerani and Muslim technocrats such as the ex-mayor of Tehran; (4) supporters of Montazeri who is under house arrest, part of the seminary religious school in Ghom; (5) Newspapers, publishers who have benefited from the relative freedoms of the last 2 years; (6) the new student movement – although it, like group (5), covers a rainbow of different opinions and some of them did distance themselves from Khatami in late autumn.

Both factions of the Iranian regime have collaborated in the repressive policies of the last few months, however supporters of both factions have not obeyed their leaders, and it is indeed their arguments that have exposed the truth and cornered leaders of both factions.

What is the logic behind the recent wave of repression?

The severe economic crisis and the sharp drop in the price of oil mean that many workers haven't been paid for more than six months, over 4000 small manufacturing plant are closing down. The government admits to 800,000 unemployed school leavers and it is the fear of these struggles that prompts the regime to suppression.

As early as September 1998, Safavi the head of the Islamic guards warns dissidents: these pens must be broken, tongues must be cut off, some people must be beheaded. On September 15, Ayatollah Khameneii, calls on authorities to punish those publications that "abuse freedom". The next day, the paper *Tous* was closed down the editor, the publishing manager, a leading columnist, and a journalist are arrested as enemies of god. A few days later, the press supervisory board of the newspaper *Tous* is accused of insulting Khomeini. Soon after the repression worsens. Political murders are the regime's answer to political unrest, to create an atmosphere of terror and fear.

The alliance of the Fedayin majority (that section of the Fedayin that swung behind Khomeini in 1980), the Tudeh (former pro-Moscow Communist Party) and the Republicans (an array of groups from ex-constitutional monarchists to supporters of former prime minister Bakhtiar) has found its hero – yet Khatami's promised freedom is always "freedom with limitations." Khatami refers to "legal opposition", those who can be tolerated in the Islamic order. So far the legal opposition is limited to various factions of the Islamic Republic. Workers' protests over closures, redundancy, unpaid salaries are attacked by the military forces. According to one writer: "Even if one assumes that Khatami's faction were not involved in recent killings, all evidence indicate that Iranian dissidents have become the sacrificial lambs of the fights among different factions of the Islamic government, and those clerics who warned earlier to break arms and to behead have done what they wanted to do. As the president of the Islamic Republic, Khatami is implicated in what is going on in Iran, under the aegis of a system he pledges to rescue. I want to underline that the latest killings of opposition intellectuals are not an isolated and aberrant 'incidents.' They are social events that become meaningful in relation with the structure of the Islamic Republic, as such the entire system of the IRI must be put on trial. Khatami's opponents are acting within the confines of the very system that make his socio-political presence legitimate, a system built on repression and terror. Khatami's attempt to bring

'order' to that system is too little, too late." (Hammed Shahidian, December 1998).

The most obvious suspects in these crimes have gone unchecked so far: members of the Special Operations Committee, including Khamneii and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, Head of the Islamic Judiciary Mohammad Yazdi, Speaker of the Islamic Majlis Nateq Nouri, generals Mohsem Reza'i and Yahya Rahim-Safavi, the former and present commanders of the revolutionary guards. Khatami and Khamneii have this week both complimented the ministry of intelligence for its findings, probably after a compromise at the top – yet there is a great difference in the approach of the two factions: pro-Khatami papers called for, and finally got, the resignation of the minister in charge of intelligence; Khamneii is looking for foreign agents (including foreign radio stations) who have infiltrated the ministry of Intelligence! According to him the "enemies" of Islam kill these people to tarnish the reputation of the Islamic Republic. Who are the "enemies"? The Leader never specifies.

The left

This article will not discuss those sections of the Iranian left known as estehalegar (who see Khatami as saviour, want a smooth transfer of power ...). These are the very same groups who defended Khomeini: the Tudeh party, Fedayin majority, etc. As always, they seek minor reforms of the existing system, they have given up socialist aspirations and consider "bourgeois democracy" the ideal system in Iran.

In what is known as the radical left in Iran there is currently a debate on how to deal with recent developments. Some propose that the Left should direct its main attacks on the Khamneii faction, without supporting the so called reformists. Others, wrongly in my opinion, believe that "as reforms delay revolutions" the slogan of the day should be "death to Khatami". The latter position is generally linked to a mistrust of the revolutionary movement in Iran (developing independently of Khatami, such as the movements we see in factories, in universities); a strong prejudice amongst many that if we (i.e. the left in exile) are not the vanguard of the movement, it can't be revolutionary. Sections of the left are looking for "Marxist" slogans while a movement can be revolutionary without reciting Marxist terminology. New terms (jargon) is used daily in Iran – for example "mardom Salari" ("people's power"). For political exiles who have been away for 14-18 years, even the language of some of the contemporary debate in Iran is alien.

Others in the Iranian Left have always denied that workers' struggle are at times started by Islamic councils or what is left of them – while the admission of such facts would not reduce the importance of a workers' strike. It is also true that some on the left are worried by debates on democracy inside Iran as it will show up their own limitations. Those who only support democracy as long as it is within the accepted framework of their ideology get into a tangle when people compare their position with that of Khatami. Some in the Iranian left revel in the idea of "clandestine politics" and actually favour dictatorships as it justifies their internal and external shortcomings regarding political freedoms. After all you can't hold a congress under severe repression; you can use the excuse of repression to stifle debate ...

Others have maintained that the whole debate of the factions is a plot to deceive the people. There are also the workerist arguments, e.g. "why should we support the Writers Association or writers" (!), forgetting that it can act as a catalyst, as indeed it did prior to the uprising in 1979. In addition the Iranian left has little understanding of the use of tactics – and the problem is compounded by a fear that use of tactics is compromise or treachery. A complete distrust and indeed childish behaviour towards alliances has damaged the Iranian left in the last few years, while all sorts of co-operation can and should happen against dictatorships. This is different from supporting Khomeini when he was in power, yet the left in Iran now has a phobia about any co-operation. Many organisations of the left seek 100% agreements before acting together. Others expect loyalty in existing alliances, while parallel alliances and joint actions are in fact healthy and should be encouraged.

What about the future?

The admission by the ministry for interior signalled the compromise of the two factions ... however the protests and strikes continues and neither Khatami nor Khamneii are capable of controlling clerics and civilians in their factions. The fight for democracy, the struggles of workers, state employees who haven't been paid for over 6 months against privatisation ... have only just began. The student movement is openly comparing Islamic dictatorship (Velayat Faghih) with the rule of the Shah. The promises of the Iranian president for "civil society" and Islamic tolerance seem already too little too late.

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