

Iran's New Regime: Hostile to Its People, Incompatible with the World

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Nowadays Islamic Iran appears to challenge the world. What kind of phenomenon is this regime and how it must be treated? This issue has been the subject of hundreds or perhaps thousands of discussions and reviews. The short review below is a humble attempt to shed some light on this issue.

Defeat of the reformists in the seventh parliamentary elections and later in the presidential election last June and the coming to power of Ahmadinejad and his men, marked the beginning of a new phase in Iran's political life. The so-called reformist movement had lost its momentum long before they suffered defeat in the hands of this new brand of Islamic conservatism. The reformists lacked the political will to mobilize and fight back, they let down the various social movements, let the initial enthusiasm evaporate, and thus they deprived themselves of any effective popular support and paved the way for their own defeat. But the defeat of the reformists did not bring about a new unity and internal harmony within the power circles as expected. In fact those who came to power were not conservatives in the conventional meaning that world has been familiar with, but they are a particular faction called fundamentalists or more literally "believers in principles". Today the power struggle in ruling circles is not carried out between the conservatives and reformists as it was a few years ago but between the conservatives and these new fundamentalists. It seems that conservatives are getting pushed to the margin as well.

Ideologically, the fundamentalists stem from "Hojatieh Association" and its predecessor the "Anti-Baha'i Association". Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, the fanatic head teacher of "Haqqani Seminary" who preaches the harshest form of fundamentalism and intolerance, is their spiritual leader. A number of the cabinet members and those who hold sensitive posts in the new government are graduates of this seminary.

The fundamentalists are extremely dogmatic, intolerant, and violent who openly advocate killing of the opponents and critics; they not only denounce democracy and human rights and label them anti-Islamic, which is more or less common in the Islamic system of Iran, but openly declare that the legitimacy of the state only comes from God and therefore the Islamic state is only responsible to God and answers to Him.

They are messianic, or to name it by its Iranian version, pro-Mahdi; they believe in the resurrection of Mahdi. For Mahdi to reappear, as the ideology states, the world must be filled with injustice and tyranny. Thus they consider the current conflict between themselves and the West as a sign of the coming of Mahdi and a god given opportunity to get rid of injustice and un-Islamic behavior.

To give you a picture of what this creed is about in everyday reality, let me give you a few examples. After attending the General Assembly of the United Nations a few months ago, president Ahmadinejad clearly stated in a meeting that during his speech there was a halo of light surrounding him and some of the Ayatollahs nodded in agreement and said this was a sign of the approval of the government by the God. When he recently wrote his letter to President Bush, one of those Ayatollahs called it a miracle and likened it to the letters Prophet Mohammad wrote to the Kings of Iran and Ethiopia that apparently caused the demise of those empires. Very recently another high official praising Mr. Ahmadinejad claimed that if there were to be anymore Prophets, Ahmadinejad would be the one!

Whether these people really believe their stories is not that important, what is important is that they preach it and act upon it. It is interesting to know that Mr. Ahmadinejad has hired an ethics teacher for his cabinet members so they get preached on Islamic ethics every morning before they start their day. It has also been known that some of his ministers are writing their wishes on pieces of paper and throw it down into the Jamkarn Well near the holy city of Qom where Mahdi is believed to be hiding in the wish that Mahdi is going to open those letters and fulfill their wishes. It is also interesting to know that even based on the Shiite religion tales, Mahdi is hiding in a well in Samara in Iraq and not in Qom! This excessive extremism has angered even some Ayatollahs and members of the Majles or the Iranian parliament.

Aside from these things that are the subject of ridicule amongst the majority of people and especially the young generation, there are other characteristics of the new government

that are much more serious and troublesome. It is not funny to know that some of the ministers have directly been involved in killing and torture of dissidents. The minister of interior, Mr. Pour-Mohammadi, is one of the three people who in the summer of 1988 killed thousands of prisoners per order of Ayatollah Khomeini. This crime was so shocking that Ayatollah Montazeri wrote a letter condemning the massacre and called it an atrocity worse than those committed by Shah's regime. That letter, as is known, caused him his position as the number two in the hierarchy of power.

A number of ministers in Ahmadinejad's government who have come from the infamous ministry of Etela'at or Iranian Intelligence have been involved in the so-called serial killings. It was a wave of political assassinations organized by the top ranking Etela'at officials during the first year of Khatemi's government in which a number of poets, authors, and political dissidents were kidnapped and brutally killed.

Another important feature of this new government is its increasing dependence on Pasdaran or the Revolutionary Guards. The military- financial complex of Pasdaran is getting control of huge assets in the country. It is getting lucrative contracts from right and left. For instance, \$ 1.3 billion contract of gas pipelines was given from the ministry of petroleum to the Pasdaran. This way the loyalty of the powerful heads of this fearful military and security apparatus to the president is secured and at the same time the institution gets the upper hand in the power struggles to come. To pay justice, one should admit that authorizing Pasdaran to get involved in business activities and getting them lucrative contracts started during Rafsanjani administration.

In the struggle for absolute power, the fundamentalist faction is trying to take over the Council of Experts and get rid of Rafsanjani in the Council's next election, obviously with the help of the Council of Guardians and their notorious disqualification process. Mr. Rafsanjani, who is the influential head of the Council of Expediency, was able in his time to deceive Europe for years and sell himself as a moderate. In reality, Iran's secret nuclear programs started and developed under his presidency and he has, in numerous occasions, criticized Khatemi as being too lenient with Europe about Iran's nuclear rights.

Other aspects of the new government are well known in the world: irresponsible and venturesome foreign policy, provoking tensions and blackmailing, ambition to dominate the region, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and supporting terrorism. It must be said that these policies have, more or less, been followed during the entire reign of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, Ahmadinejad is pursuing these policies more intensely and more openly. The pursuit of nuclear weapons is one result of such a policy. The Islamic Republic sees the nuclear weapon as the best means of their survival, as the guarantor of the regime. One can say that the dominant belief among mullahs in Tehran is: "I have atomic bomb; therefore I am".

Confrontation and violence is not pursued only in foreign policies. This regime cannot live in peace neither with its own people nor the outside world. In the internal affairs, Ahmadinejad's regime has intensified the policy of repression, intimidation, and persecution. The tolerance of dissent has become virtually zero; the pursuit of joy by young people is repressed, public transport workers of Tehran who only wanted to form their union and presented their economic demands are brutally hammered; student associations are attacked; professors are fired; women are subjected with even more discrimination and repression and their peaceful demonstrations are brutally attacked; national minorities are repressed more harshly than before and so on. In general, the new government has closed off all the ways of peaceful expression of dissent in the society and thus is creating an atmosphere prone to violence and internal implosion.

The problem with these policies, however, is that they are completely out of tune with the basic needs and aspirations of the Iranian people. Iranian society has changed dramatically and cannot reconcile itself with the way of life preached by Ayatollahs. The majority of Iranian people are more aware and more assertive of their rights, they stand up more frequently, they speak out more loudly, and they defy and fight back. Ahmadinejad's government has clearly exposed how out of tune it is with its own society and with the world. That is why it looks ridiculous and dangerous at the same time.

What is lacking is a credible alternative, a cohesive and powerful opposition front that can unite and lead the people in their fight for a better future. Fortunately, there have been some positive movements to remedy this huge shortcoming. The biggest task facing the Iranian opposition, both inside and outside the country, is the formation of a broad democratic coalition that fights for democracy, secularism, human rights, women's rights, nationalities rights, etc.

What can Europe and the West do in this process? The policy of critical dialogue by Europe did not succeed; neither is military attack the solution. The real alternative is uncompromising support for democracy, secularism and human rights in Iran.

The Iranian nuclear issue has created an international consensus towards the Islamic regime, which is fine. But this issue has had the opposite effect for the Iranian opposition. What can unite the opposition is the prospect of a democratic, secular and federative Iran that strives to bring social justice to all. This is a project that Iran deserves and the Iranian opposition has every right to ask the world to support.