

Iran's Hardliners Fight Back

Apr 24, 2000



Brief Analysis

Iran's hardliners, who suffered a resounding drubbing in February's first-round Majlis (parliament) elections, have been resurgent in defeat and now appear to have the momentum in their ongoing power struggle with reformist politicians and institutions. In their latest move, Iran's hardline-dominated judiciary ordered the immediate closure of twelve reformist newspapers and journals. The press crackdown combined with post-election reversals indicate that Iran's hardliners are neither down nor out.

Press Crackdown. On Sunday, April 23, Iran's judiciary ordered the immediate closure of eight reformist newspapers and four liberal periodicals. This move comes the same day a court sentenced Latif Safari, one of the leading editors in the reformist press, to two and a half years in prison for printing articles offensive to Islam, and the day after arresting Akbar Ganji, a prominent intelligence agent turned reformist journalist.

There have been warning signs of a coming press crackdown, although few expected it to be on such a scale. On April 12, about 200 journalists protested the imprisonment of Asr-i Azadegan editor Mahmud Shams. Then, on April 16, the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued a statement accusing the press of "attacking the values of the revolution" and warning, "When the time comes, these people will feel a blow to the head delivered by the revolution." On Thursday, April 20, Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i addressed a gathering of youth and condemned the press. He complained that "ten to fifteen papers are seemingly being guided by one center," and that "some segments of the press concentrate their efforts on inciting the public, sowing discord, and making the people pessimistic about the system." The Islamic Republic News Agency labeled the liberal press as part of the "conspiracies of the global arrogant powers."

The reformist Iranian press is among the most vibrant in the Middle East and has been a leading catalyst for the reformist movement. Every few blocks and at major intersections in Tehran, there are newsstands selling any number of papers, and at the offices of liberal papers in the city center, pedestrians gather to read latest editions in glass cases. Even in ministries and the offices of some hardline organizations, younger employees can often be found with a copy of their favorite liberal newspaper tucked under their desks.

Although the banning of the daily papers Gozarsh-i Ruz, Bamdad-i Nau, Aftab-i Emruz, Payam-i Azadi, Fath, Arya, Asr-i Azadegan, and Azad; the weekly Payam-i Hajar, Aban, and Arzesh; and the monthly Iran Farda represents the largest whole-scale ban on Iranian papers to date, it is by no means the first. The July 1999 riots were sparked when reactionary pressure groups and hardline police forces attacked a Tehran University dormitory after students demonstrated against the closure of the most prominent reformist newspaper, Salaam. But as quickly as the judiciary has closed papers at the urging of hardline-dominated organizations, the reformist Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has issued permits for the same editorial boards to reopen the papers under new names.

Of the journalists arrested, Akbar Ganji has been the greatest thorn in the side of conservatives in recent months. A member of Fath's editorial board, he has been investigating the 1998 killings of at least five intellectuals and writers, allegedly at the hands of Intelligence Ministry agents. (In 1999, the intelligence agent accused of masterminding the murders, Sa'id Emami, allegedly committed suicide in prison under still-unexplained circumstances). Ganji's

background in the intelligence service has added to the prominence of his charges.

The current ban leaves a few reformist papers still functioning, notably Akbar-i Eqtesad and Sobh-i Emruz. Also still on the streets are the moderate Ettela'at; hardline Kayhan, closely linked to both the IRGC and the Supreme Leader; and Jumhuri-yi Islami, widely seen as the voice of the Intelligence Ministry. Ettela'at and Kayhan are among the most widely available papers in the provinces.

Suspense about the Majlis Election. The closures come against the backdrop of an overwhelming reformist victory in the first round of the February 17, 2000, Majlis elections. Reformists led by President Muhammad Khatami's brother, Muhammad Reza Khatami, initially took 148 of the 290 seats while hardliners won just 35. But the extent to which the reformist landslide will translate into a parliamentary mandate remains to be seen. Since the vote, the hardline Council of Guardians has overturned the election results in about ten districts and has delayed setting a date for the necessary run-off elections, even though the new parliament is supposed to take office on May 28. Under Article 65 of the Constitution, though, a parliament may not be seated until a quorum--not yet achieved--is present. The post-election actions by the Council of Guardians have sparked several days of protests and rioting in many of the affected districts. In Khalkhal and Firuzabad, demonstrators burned twenty cars and a theological school, and protests in Ghachsaran resulted in over 150 arrests. Protests also rocked the town of Basht and the province of Hormuzgan. In Shush and Dasht-i Azadegan, eight people were killed in clashes. And, on April 12, several hundred protestors gathered in front of the Interior Ministry. The Council has also refused to confirm the final results in dozens of other constituencies, meaning that the reformist majority may not be as large as had been expected in the immediate aftermath of February's elections.

Hardliners Resurgent. Hardliners have sought to undermine Khatami's allies in other ways. On March 12, Khatami's leading advisor and reformist tactician, Sa'id Hajjarian, was shot and paralyzed in a Tehran street by an assailant who has since been linked with the IRGC. Earlier this month, the brother of the president and leading vote-getter in Tehran, Muhammad Reza Khatami, was hauled into court and charged with libel at the urging of the hardline Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), the Islamic Republic News Agency, and the Council of Guardians. Other plaintiffs in recent actions against the press include the Intelligence Ministry, the IRGC, Kayhan, and the Headquarters for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Many hardliners also fear that Khatami, emboldened by a reformist Majlis, may seek real detente with the West and even a renewed relationship with the United States, although this is not an election issue. In this light, the closed trial of the thirteen Jews arrested by hardline forces and charged with death penalty offenses becomes another front in the power struggle: any guilty verdict in the trial slated to restart on May 1 threatens to sabotage the ongoing detente between the West and Iran. Furthermore, the past week has seen rumors swirl of an impending IRGC coup to oust Khatami.

U.S. Policy Considerations. On March 17, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright delivered a speech in which she reiterated American openness to work with Iran to bring down the "wall of mistrust." (Ironically, one of the markers of change she cited was "an increasingly competent press.") Although the ongoing power struggle in Iran does not mean that the United States should cease its attempts to engage that country, it does show the wisdom of Washington's policy to proceed slowly and cautiously. The official reaction in Iran to the decision to lift American sanctions on some Iranian goods has been decidedly mixed. The latest actions against the press and the reformist Majlis victory indicate that the reformists have not consolidated power despite three years of Khatami's administration and a popular mandate. Khatami has not yet been able to extend his control over powerful organs of government like the IRGC, official news agency, LEF, and Ministry of Intelligence.

Conclusions. The press crackdown further reinforces the fact that the U.S. government should not judge change in Iran on the reformists' rhetoric alone, no matter how genuine, but must view the Iranian government as a whole. The hardliners may be marginalized at the polls, but they have many other organs of power at their disposal and an

agenda that remains both anti-Western and anti-reform. How the Iranian people will react to the hardliners' crackdown is unclear. Perhaps the localized riots and demonstrations of the last few weeks--in constituencies where the election results were overturned--will spread. A repeat of widespread protest remains a real possibility.

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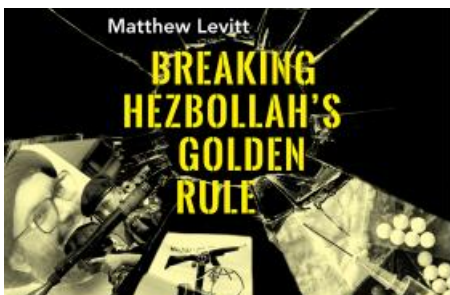
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