

Voices of Iran

Jul 15, 1999



Articles & Testimony

To be taken by surprise by events in Iran has become almost routine. The election victory of Mohammed Khatemi in May 1997 came as a surprise. Now, with the student demonstrations during the past week, Iran has once again surprised us with perhaps the biggest challenge to the Islamic regime in the past 15 years.

The easiest way for us to explain the unexpected turn of events would be to repeat the fashionable mantra that this is another instance of the clash between the hard-liners and reformist President Khatemi.

A more apt description is that the events of the past few days reflect the paradoxes and contradictions in Khatemi himself. He is on the one hand part of the ruling elite and believes in the basic tenets of the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, he is genuinely committed to certain changes and reforms.

But it seems impossible in the case of Iran to have "virtual theocracy." To the vast majority of Iranian citizens, "reform" means something different from what it means to Iran's rulers. This is clearly understood by the hard-liners, who justifiably see true reform as their own doom and the end for all practical purposes of the Islamic Republic. The hard-liners have been harassing, arresting, torturing and murdering for the past two years not just to oppose Khatemi. They have committed these crimes mainly because they fear the growing forces within Iranian civil society. The women, progressive clerics, journalists and youths at the forefront of the struggles have demands that are not identical with Khatemi's ideas of reform.

The past two years have witnessed an amazing flourishing of civil society, an unprecedented critique of reactionary laws and the rule of the supreme leader. At the same time, there have been continued human rights violations, murders of secular and nationalist figures, persecution of minorities, torture and detention of prominent clerics and stonings and executions of ordinary citizens as well as activists.

No, it would be too simplistic to conclude that the hard-liners have pursued these policies just to oppose the president. The main target of the hard-liners has been the forces within Iran's growing civil society, forces that now act in the name of democracy rather than that of Islam. These forces oppose reactionary laws against women and religious minorities, and reject the idea of a Western "cultural invasion." When the protesting students chanted "Long live liberty, death to despotism" and "Liberty or death," they were using the voices and slogans that ushered in the 1906 Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

The students' slogans for liberty and justice were not just general terms. The students have given these words specific meaning through their particular demands. The protests resounded against the main organs of the Islamic regime: the supreme religious leader, the judiciary, the security forces, the revolutionary guards and the parliament. The students have demanded freedom for political prisoners and freedom of the press. They have evoked as their heroes and ideals not just Khatemi but also nationalist leaders Daryush and Parvaneh Forouhar, murdered in 1998, and former prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh, overthrown in 1953. These nationalists are no heroes of the Islamic Republic; the Ayatollah Khomeini so hated Mossadegh that he refused to tolerate having a street named after the prime minister following the Islamic Revolution.

Everyone from the leader to the president has condemned the acts of violence against the students and has promised justice and punishment for the perpetrators of violence. But these pleas and promises have been made before, in the aftermath of the murders of nationalist leaders, the numerous cases of harassment of ordinary citizens at the hands of vigilantes and, recently, the arrest of Jews as spies.

The unkept promises of the past are coming back to haunt Khatemi. The students, disappointed that Khatemi has not been more active, chanted, "Khatemi, Khatemi, where are you?" Surprisingly, it was Khatemi who condemned the protesters' leaders as "attacking the foundations of the regime and of wanting to foment tensions and disorders." He warned that "deviations will be repressed with force and determination."

President Khatemi is not a cause but rather a symptom of change. He represents the paradox of both belonging and remaining faithful to the regime, and at the same time presenting an agenda that shakes its very foundations. He is caught between two forces.

The standard by which we judge Khatemi, or any force in Iran, should be the Iranian people's demands and aspirations, as articulated by representatives of the growing civil society. Democratic forces around the world cannot afford to be cynical about their own values: They should support those values when they are being reasserted and fought for in countries like Iran. When and if Khatemi encourages those values through deeds as well as words, he should be wholeheartedly supported. And when he attempts to block them or throw doubts upon them, he should be criticized accordingly.



Washington Post

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