

The Iranian conundrum

One cannot deny that the grip of the clergy has been weakened; people have become restive and desperate for change. In the event of a divided clergy's failure to hold power any longer, a military takeover, not people's power or democracy, seems to be the next alternative order in Iran.

TAJ HASHMI

DRAWING parallels is an old art for historians as well as other members of the broad humanities and social science disciplines. Hence the examples of the successful Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the failed Tiananmen Square Fiasco (without being disrespectful to the Chinese aspirants for "democracy," which many of them could not define, as I recall from what I watched on my TV screen in 1989) are being juxtaposed against the recent upheaval in Iran.

If we believe analysts and Iran and Islam "experts" -- there seems to be too many to name and keep track of what they are churning out every hour -- either we are on the threshold of what happened in Iran in 1979 or China in 1989. Some of them even think of re-staging the Russian or East European dramas of 1989-90 in Iran. All of these "experts" cannot be correct at the same time.

I still remember the CIA's predictions about Khomeini made in the wake of his triumphant entry into Tehran in February 1979: "This mullah is not interested in power." It is tempting to cite the foreword of a book, *The Future of the Gulf* (RILA, London 1990), which a bigwig of the (British) Royal Institute for International Affairs wrote: [to paraphrase him] "The Persian Gulf will remain an abode of peace and tranquility since both Iraq and Iran are tired and exhausted of the eight-year-long bloody war." The book came out in May 1990 and Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August. And Kuwait is very much a "Gulf Country."

I have just given these examples of how "experts" are often proven wrong. Iran is not going to witness another 1979 in the foreseeable future. Most unlikely another Tiananmen episode is going to be repeated again; it seems, whatever was supposed to happen, has happened. One cannot, however, totally rule out a military takeover (if the clergy is really determined to shoot at its feet).

Then again, this does not mean that the grip of the ayatollahs and their beneficiaries (mostly corrupt and power-drunk) will remain as firm as it used to be. They have been shaken, not only because the young and restless are on street, but also because the not-so-radical Hossein Mousavi, and most importantly Grand Ayatollah Hossein Montazeri, a close associate of Khomeini up to 1989, have also come forward demanding accountability and democracy from the government. Montazeri has publicly ridiculed the election results: "No one in their right mind can believe" the results of the Iranian elections.

In his public letter to the "oppressed people of Iran" the grand ayatollah asks them "to continue reclaiming their dues calmly," and then asks the police and armed forces to defy orders and not to "sell their religion" to the regime. So far so good!

In spite of this, we can hardly ignore what President Ahmadinejad represents without setting aside the fact about his immense popularity among rural and urban poor underdogs. He is not the one calling the shots. He merely represents the well-entrenched clergy under the "supreme leader" Ayatollah Khomeini, backed by well-armed and loyal three-million-strong Basej militia and a couple of hundred thousand of Revolutionary Guards (yet to have turned disloyal unlike the Shah's troops in 1979), thanks to their vested interests and "ideological" commitment to the Islamic Republic.

What very few analysts have so far informed us about the Iranian crisis is -- how despite the popular perception outside Iran -- Ahmadinejad is "more popular, hence electable" in Iran, than his contenders including former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi, no liberal democrat and a former protégé of Khomeini.

We may partially agree with two leading Iran experts having years of teaching and research experience in the US, including the National Security Council, in this regard. Without denying the fact about election manipulations in Iran, very similar to many other countries, they assert that as the election victories by Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani were "surprising" to many, so is Ahmadinejad's re-election. They assert that most Iranians consider him the winner, not in the polls but also in the televised debate with Moussavi.

Rafsanjani's widely known corrupt sons and daughter Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former member of parliament, publicly supported Moussavi, which seemed to have negative impact on the latter's candidature. Moussavi's willingness to suspend Iran's uranium enrichment program without getting anything substantial from the West, might have cost him dearly at the polls.

In sum, this study also reveals that Ahmadinejad had always been ahead of his rivals in the nation-wide opinion polls conducted by the Washington-based Terror-Free Tomorrow during May 11 and 20, at least by twenty points (Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "Ahmadinejad won. Get over it," Politico, June 15, 2009, www.politico.com/news/stories/0609/23745.html).

However, as eye-witness accounts suggest, the situation in Iran has some potential to turn more violent in coming days. There are also signs of political compromise and initiatives are being taken by some leading members of the powerful Council of Guardians run by 86 clerics in this regard. Ayatollah Khomeini is the "supreme leader" of the council, which is again headed by pro-Moussavi Rafsanjani, widely known as father of two corrupt brothers, who are also with Moussavi. We also hear from these accounts that possibly one-third of the council of clerics are pro-Rafsanjani and about one-quarter is considered loyal to Ahmadinejad. The rest could vote "either way."

In the event of Ahmadinejad's police brutality further alienating most members of the supreme council of clerics, both Khomeini and his protégé Ahmadinejad would be in trouble. One analyst has already raised the question: "If the clergy become Khomeini's enemy, just think about it." He is implying that while the Shah could not exist by alienating the clergy, Khomeini and Ahmadinejad would not be able to sustain any longer without their support.

Then again, one may reject the analysis as mere wishful thinking. With hindsight we know the Shah lost because the clergy was dead against him, but so were the *bazaari* (small traders), middle classes and urban and rural poor. We also know that presently the well-entrenched and extremely privileged clergy (some members, including Rafsanjani, are widely known for corruption and hedonistic life-style) is least likely to rock the boat to the detriment of its collective interest.



Moussavi supporters chant for their own chance at "change."

We must not lose sight of the fact that the Iranian regime since the Revolution is not only a ruthless theocracy, but it has almost all the ingredients of a proto-fascist military oligarchy. And one should not be that optimistic about the prospect of overthrowing such a regime in days or weeks by Gandhian non-violent Satyagraha or civil disobedience.

Without mass defection of the privileged Basej militia and Revolutionary Guards for some unexplainable reasons, and without the clergy's sudden desire to relinquish power and privileges it is enjoying for the last thirty years just for the sake of democracy are the least likely things to happen in Iran in the coming months.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the grip of the clergy has been weakened; people have become restive and desperate for change, especially the bulk of the urban youth. In the event of a divided clergy's failure to hold power any longer, a military takeover, not people's power or democracy, seems to be the next alternative order in Iran.

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The batter is the matter

A panoramic sports championship has one undisputable merit: it reveals a great deal about any national frame of mind. The churning point of the cricket fiesta in England was when a British master-of-ceremonies asked everyone to stand up for the national anthems. "Be upstanding!" he boomed.

M.J. AKBAR

TAKE a guess. What would be the answer to this question in an India-wide opinion poll: which has upset you more, India's early departure from the T20 world championship or the toxic wars against Maoists raging across the heartland of the nation?

No prizes for getting the answer right.

The spoilt brat of Indian cricket used to be an individual who had better be left nameless since he has finally departed from the team. He has been replaced by a collective noun. The utterly spoilt brat of Indian cricket is the cricket fan. This silly idiot has come to believe, for no worthwhile reason, that cricket is a game with only one result, a victory for India. All of us want our team to win more than it loses. But the fun of sports lies in unpredictability. No one can be sure what the particular chemistry of a set of men will be on any given day, or when luck will bend its momentum in one direction or the other.

The part that media plays in publicising stupid tantrums following a defeat convinces me that this is not the work of genuine sports fans. They are publicity-seekers. If television cameras did not hover around their stupid protests, there would be no protests.

No one expects a captain to celebrate after his team loses, but the grovelling apology by Captain-Commander-General-Admiral-Marshall-President Dhoni strikes me as well-planned humbug of the sort encouraged by PR agencies. If you depend on the fans to buy all the products you advertise, then it makes sense to pamper even the most petulant with a pre-emptive apology. An apology costs nothing. Ads bring big bucks.

Media is clearly desperate for anything to fill the page or occupy the screen. We do want to know why Ravindra Jadeja was sent up the batting order when the tic in his eye is sufficient evidence to prove that he will not be able to see a rising ball, but do we want the answer from Aamir Khan or John Abraham? Their terribly inane reactions were turned into news stories. I just hope we do not see the day when Dhoni and Virender Sehwa are expected to double up as literary critics.

A panoramic sports championship has one undisputable merit: it reveals a great deal about any national frame of mind. The churning point of the cricket



Batting blues.

fiesta in England, at least for me, was when a British master-of-ceremonies (face unseen on television, but accent unmistakable) asked everyone to stand up for the national anthems that were played before the start of the match. "Be upstanding!" he boomed. That the English language is subject to various forms of torture, many of them unknown even to Dick Cheney, is a recognised fact. But this was murder of the language at home, matricide at its worst.

What the chap meant was "Please stand up." "Upstanding" means something else altogether. It is a synonym of honesty and virtue, a definition of morals. To deepen my anguish, an advertisement followed, trying to persuade me to buy a cellphone in "deep black." What on earth is deep black? Have you ever seen "shallow black?" Blue or green or red lend themselves to variations of deep and light, but black is black. A paler shade of black is grey, not light black. This may not be on the scale of matricide, but it is a wound nevertheless.

In an effort to make the 20-over form of the game more American, the organisers have decided to change the language of commentary into American English. Hence the prolific and nonsensical use, in reportage, of "batter" for "batsman." To begin with, "batsman" is perfectly adequate. The change does not add anything to meaning. A clever lawyer might argue that a change was needed to make the term gender-neutral, particularly with the growing popularity of women's cricket.

That would not be the truth, but it is an argument. If change is essential then you cannot usurp a word that already means something else. "Batter" is an existing term. It can be a verb, meaning "to hit repeatedly with hard blows,"

derived from the French *batre*. Or it could be a noun, "a mixture of flour, egg, and milk or water, used for making pancakes or coating food before frying." The *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary* does not recognise, as yet, a third meaning for "batter," but it is possibly only a matter of time.

If it were elegant, there might be some aesthetic justification for murder. But all that is happening is that English is being battered to death. Can't the Americans be content with taking over the world? Must they take over the English so completely? Or is it a case of mere subservience? Americans do not play cricket, and are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future, so why should they care one way or another?

I had planned to end this column with a handsome flourish, a grand solution to the problem of finding someone to play in place of Ravindra Jadeja. Judging by the manner in which most Indian batsmen were getting battered by the rising ball, the coach, Gary Kirsten, could have summoned someone from the Indian women's team to bat for the men. Alas the women's team also lost in the semi-finals.

But at least its captain did not apologise.

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Signs you've been in Asia too long



My wife and I lived in a hotel at one time. Eventually we moved out and found a normal home. I was shocked to come home from work the first day and find that no one had folded the end of the toilet paper into a neat little triangle for me. "We are not animals," I remember shouting at my wife. It took some time to realise that hotel life had changed my perception of what was normal.

In the same way, Westerners who spend a long time in Asia find themselves "going native." One English friend went back to London after several years in Vietnam. Staff at Harrods, a fancy store, told her the price of the scarf she was looking at. She laughed scornfully in their faces, offered 20%,

and then marched out of the shop. Only when she noticed that staff failed to follow her, reducing the price at every step, did she recall that you just don't do that sort of thing in London.

These memories were triggered by a letter I received from reader Jo Bunker, who has been living in Hong Kong for many years. She was in turn inspired by a posting in we listed signs that you were a post-modern Asian.

"My list of signs you've been here too long would look like this," she said.

- You find yourself wondering how your friends back home can possibly survive without a rice cooker.
- You seek out a Chinatown when on holiday.
- You are shocked and suspicious when someone holds a door open for you.
- You manically over-press the "door close" button in the lift.
- You peer over people's shoulders at their account balance in the ATM queue.

- You sneer at anyone who orders sweet and sour pork in a Chinese restaurant.

Laurie Ashton, a Canadian who moved to Sri Lanka, wrote in her blog that she knew she had lived there too long when she stopped taking pictures of water buffalos mingling with traffic.

For Westerners in general, here are 12 signs "You've been in Asia too long."

- You find yourself bowing slightly when you are introduced to someone.
- You don't think there's anything weird about eating a tenderloin steak with a side of rice.
- You think of a motor scooter as a family vehicle for up to nine people.
- You own more ethnic clothes than any of your Asian friends.
- If you find a bug in your food, you pick it out and keep eating.
- You no longer close your eyes when the driver of your auto-rickshaw cuts in and out of lanes missing other vehicles by a millimetre.
- It now seems natural that breakfast buffets feature fried noodles, rice and



- curry.
- When someone asks you a difficult question, you see the usefulness of responding with a South Asian head-wobble.
- Using cutlery to eat feels weird.
- You're not particularly bothered when rural people defecate behind the nearest convenient bush.
- You now really like foodstuffs you once thought weird and disgusting like bitter melon, stinky tofu, lime pickle, and stewed taro.
- The footprints on the toilet seat are your own.
- It no longer seems weird to see a stunningly overloaded vehicle.
- You are no longer too embarrassed to admit to other Westerners that you have servants.

But next time you visit your home in the west, remember not to defecate behind the nearest convenient bush. Especially not near Harrods.

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