

Tiananmen in Tehran?

The Iranian people, unlike the Chinese students, have had a real taste of political freedom. Popular figures such as Mir Hossein Mousavi, the leading opposition candidate, are now directly attacking the regime's power structure.

MICHAEL HIRSH

WHEN I visited Iran two years ago, one thing was clear from my reporting: there was virtually no prospect that Iran's Islamic regime would collapse any time in the foreseeable future. A lot of people hated the clerics, but apart from a few dissenting voices, the political opposition was all but gone. Well, it's back. And the consequences for clerics are likely to be far more dire than the last time political ferment appeared in force, when reformist President Mohammad Khatami took office in the 1990s.

Prior to this election, the government led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the radical Islamist president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had adopted the rather savvy approach of letting people enjoy themselves a bit and, above all, make money so as to induce political apathy.

Religious conservatives openly embraced the "China model," whereby the mandarins in Beijing managed to quash political dissent after Tiananmen Square by sublimating the impulse for a better life into a booming economy. In Iran, the unrest of the '90s was addressed with an analogous formula: Ahmadinejad and his "new right" kept most of the

Khatami-era social reforms and focused most of their ire on political dissenters.

Now, thanks to overreaching by Khamenei and his hardline allies, who apparently sought to secure their power with an electoral coup d'état, even that approach must be called into question. While the legitimacy of the Islamic regime is still widely accepted, Khamenei's position atop Iranian society was never as certain as it was deemed to be in the West.

The Supreme Leader's clear misreading of the situation -- his initial embrace of the election results as a "divine" victory for Ahmadinejad followed by a jittery call for an investigation into the vote -- has amply demonstrated his fallibility. Key figures like Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president, have dared to question Khamenei's judgment, an act considered an unbreachable "red line" in the past.

And now the extraordinary uprising in the streets will undoubtedly embolden the whisperers who, for years in back rooms, have derided Khamenei as an inadequate and faltering heir to the father of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. And here is the key point: If Khamenei goes, there may be no Supreme Leader to follow him. Such is the factionalism among the clerics that no candidate seems to possess sufficient prestige -- at

least, that is what I heard when I was there. Given the broad questioning of state legitimacy that is taking place now in the streets, this could all plant the seeds of future democratic transition from mullah rule. I say "could" because we are a long way from that.

For an autocratic police state, the Iranian power structure is uniquely pluralistic. It is governed by a system of clerical checks and balances that leaves no figure, even Khamenei, with unquestioned authority. Rafsanjani, for example, is head of the Assembly of Experts, a council of senior clerics that at least theoretically has the power to remove Khamenei if he is judged unqualified to serve (highly unlikely, even now, given that Khamenei has stocked the assembly with allies).

When I visited the religious city of Qom, where Khomeini got his start, I interviewed a few dissident clerics. One of that group, Grand Ayatollah Yusef Saanei, urged me to write critically about the Guardian Council, which has the power to vet presidential candidates and has now called for at least a partial recount of Sunday's vote results.

"Why don't you warn your readers about the Guardian Council?" Saanei said reproachfully. Saanei told me he believes this all-powerful body, created to ensure that Iranian laws and practices adhere to Islamic code, was out of control, intruding far too much in the lives and politics of Iran.

He said the entire budget for the Guardian Council in the early days of the revolution "was only like \$2,000; it's getting millions of dollars now," and



Protests rage on.

argued the council had become a means of eliminating reformers and dissidents from running for office when it should play a much more low-key role.

During our talk in 2007, Saanei even acknowledged that, while he believed in Islamic rule, he was open to the idea that the Iranian people might decide to vote the clerics out of power one day. "It's entirely possible," he said. "There's no need for the clerics to be in charge. If people don't want them, they don't want them." He said that Ayatollah Ali Sistani's "quietist" approach to religion and politics next door in Iraq -- which prevents clerics from directly running government

-- was just fine with him.

While the current Islamic regime will no doubt continue to embrace the China model, that may not be as realistic in a political system that is at least partially democratic and pluralistic. Open dissent exists in Iran because the mullah state has allowed it; it is the mechanism by which the system has allowed its detractors a release valve. If a newspaper goes a bit over the line -- which usually means questioning the clerics -- the authorities will ban it for a few months.

If the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Intelligence thinks Iranian public figures are lining up against

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or his policies, they'll simply disqualify them from running for office. They won't be arrested in the dead of night and taken to a secret prison; their application will just be mysteriously denied. The question is, will any of this "soft repression" be tolerated now?

In an incisive blog entry on Monday, The New Yorker's Laura Secor wrote that "the unavoidable analogy has become 1989. The big question is where we are: Wenceslas Square or Tiananmen?" But this is Iran, and no historical analogy will fit just right. Iran's mullah state is more deeply entrenched than the corrupt, Soviet-supported regimes in countries like Czechoslovakia were back then.

And yet this won't be Tiananmen Square either. Unlike the Chinese Politburo, which only had to crush the Tiananmen protests and oust reformist political figures like Zhao Ziyang, Iran's clerics have a much tougher challenge than Beijing's mandarins. The Iranian people, unlike the Chinese students, have had a real taste of political freedom. Popular figures such as Mir Hossein Mousavi, the leading opposition candidate, are now directly attacking the regime's power structure.

With the move to recount votes, the Guardian Council, which has been closely allied with Khamenei, will try hard to ensure the regime's legitimacy. It may well succeed. But the seeds of illegitimacy have been planted, and it may prove very difficult to uproot them.

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Factional war grows as BJP sinks

The Bharatiya Janata Party's second consecutive defeat in the national elections has led to vicious infighting. The BJP's pettiest and meanest traits are on full display in this sordid power-play.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE Bharatiya Janata Party's second consecutive defeat in the national elections has led to vicious infighting. The BJP's pettiest and meanest traits are on full display in this sordid power-play. Former finance

RSS has joined the fray for the first time with its ideologue M.G. Vaidya dismissing the suggestion.

Shaken, party president Rajnath Singh has banned leaders from commenting on the defeat until the issue is internally discussed. But Mr. Singh lacks the authority to enforce the ban. He played partisan in belatedly announcing Mr. Arun Jaitley's resignation as general-secretary. And party leaders' bitterness is too great for a lid to be put on the issue.

The BJP's campaign heavily projected Mr. Advani as prime minister, believing his "resolute" image would appeal to the electorate. The campaign fell flat. But the Advani camp pretends it didn't.

Yet, Mr. Advani's critics are driven by ambition and ego. Mr. Jaswant Singh is loath to forgo his privileges as the leader of the opposition (LoP) in the Rajya Sabha. He attacked Advani groupie Jaitley's elevation to that post as a reward for poor performance.

Similarly, Mr. Sinha accuses the party of putting "a premium on failure." In his leaked letter to Mr. Rajnath Singh, he mocks Mr. Jaitley and Advani aide Sudheendra Kulkarni: "Those who were responsible for the ... campaign have already ... apportioned blame and given themselves a clean chit."

Mr. Sinha also says the leadership disregarded the party constitution in appointing Ms. Sushma Swaraj as the deputy LoP in the Lok Sabha, a post he himself wanted. Mr. Sinha is senior to Ms. Swaraj and rooted in one constituency (Hazaribagh). She has flitted from

Haryana to Delhi to Madhya Pradesh.

But Mr. Sinha is no exemplar of consistency. When he lost from Hazaribagh in 2004, he had no compunction in getting a Rajya Sabha nomination. His trajectory runs from the Socialists to the BJP, which he had long called communal.

Mr. Sinha belongs to the BJP's "left-out" or "lost" generation, consisting of leaders in the 60-to-80 age group. This lot resents its exclusion from all major party posts and most of the BJP's privileged constitutional-parliamentary positions, which have been monopolised by Advani loyalists.

This generation, including Mr. Murli Manohar Joshi and Mr. Arun Shourie, resents younger leaders' anointment as Mr. Vajpayee-Advani's successors.

This is the beginning of the BJP's "debate" over its debacle. There will be rancorous exchanges between the two camps which divide the BJP's national leadership: one led by Mr. Advani, including loyalists Jaitley, Swaraj, Venkaiah Naidu, Anantha Kumar and Vasundhara Raje, and the other led by Mr. Rajnath Singh, supported by Messrs Jaswant Singh, Sinha, Gopinath Munde, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Rajiv Pratap Rudy and Vijay Goel.

Most men from the second camp, barring Maharashtra BJP president Munde, have no base. Mr. Jaswant Singh, for instance, couldn't have got elected from Rajasthan given Ms. Raje's opposition. But then, neither could many in Mr. Advani's camp.

Ms. Swaraj won by fluke: her opponent didn't file his nomination papers in time.

Mr. Naidu can't get elected from his native Andhra. And Mr. Jaitley has never contested an election.

Mr. Narendra Modi, other BJP chief ministers and the super-ambitious Mr. M.M. Joshi are waiting and watching. They'll try to recruit support from different sangh parivar elements, including the RSS.

The RSS is keen to wrest control of the BJP from Mr. Advani, after his strident loyalist Jaitley attributed the BJP's defeat to its "shri" opposition to the United Progressive Alliance, and called for "moderation."

Kulkarni and journalist-ideologue Swapan Dasgupta have riled the RSS the most. Neither has a party base, but both are considered Mr. Advani's agents. He probably used them to float a trial balloon.

Kulkarni blames the BJP's anti-Muslim bigotry for its defeat and demands it sever its links with the RSS. Dasgupta too wants the BJP to adopt a Right-wing economic, social and political agenda, without the tag of religious fundamentalism, much like Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives -- although his opposition to Hindutva is purely tactical.

Mr. Advani's critics are as communal as him. Mr. Sinha stridently defended Mr. Narendra Modi. Mr. Jaswant Singh is no less hawkish than Mr. Advani -- although he doesn't like the RSS, and vice versa.

The BJP's infighting isn't over ideology or Hindutva, but over the top organisational positions.

The BJP is in historic decline and

unlikely to rebound quickly. The unique circumstances of its ascent from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s have passed, including the Ayodhya mobilisation, the anti-Mandal platform against affirmative action, the Congress's decline, and the rise of militant, illiberal, ethno-religious nationalism within the middle class.

These catapulted the BJP into power and created an illusion of success for its "social engineering" approach of combining elite support with OBC votes. The party was buoyed by forces and conditions it didn't even comprehend, and which may never return. The BJP's ideological confusion, political mobilisation crisis, and organisational crisis will now worsen.

It cannot cut the umbilical chord with the RSS. It couldn't sever it during the Janata period (1977-79), when it chose to split over the "dual membership" issue. It didn't break with the sangh after the Babri demolition or the Gujarat pogrom. It's unlikely to do that now. Those who want the BJP to break from the RSS are asking for the moon.

When under pressure, the BJP is likely to return to Hindutva. That means marginalisation, going back into the ghetto, losing yet more elections and being reduced to a niche party with a limited base, like the former Jana Sangh with 20 to 35 Lok Sabha seats.

Whatever happens, the BJP's internal bloodletting will continue relentlessly.

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Moral imperative

The decay in morality is the major problem of our society. The society is now fully distorted with corruption, hypocrisy, bribery and other immoral acts.

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MORALITY in human society originated from religion. The prime concern of morality is to guide and regulate mankind with a view to bringing discipline in societies. For instance, the origin of the institution of marriage lies in religious scriptures, whose major goals are to regulate sexual behaviour, to provide appropriate identity to the offspring and to allow inheritance of property.

Some guidelines for marriage have been prescribed in the scriptures, and these are instilled in the human psyche as moralities. "Extramarital sexual relationship is an immoral act," this is indeed an example of religion guided morality.

In fact, on many issues, morality has evolved following religious dictates. Moreover, many of the universal ethics, for instance, "not telling lies," "not killing a human being," "not taking bribe," "not stealing" are incorporated in religions and redefined in the light of punishment and reward.

Can religious guidelines at this point of time instill morality in the human psyche as they had in the past? In western societies, religious guidelines are virtually absent and religion does not play any vital role. The societies in the west put emphasis on worldly affairs and follow secular politics.

However, in the east, where societies are apparently guided by religion, do people have high moral values? Looking at Muslim majority countries, one cannot be optimistic in this context. If we analyse the societies of different Muslim countries objectively then the scenario of moral erosion will definitely be revealed.

Ironically, this fear is not effective in the sub-conscious of the modern people. The precondition of religion is the blind surrender to religious scriptures. But the logic oriented sub-conscious mind is reluctant to accept anything blindly. So, at present, though people consciously engage themselves in religious rituals, religion fails to reach its prime objective.

The objective of both religion and politics is to regulate human society.

involved in immoral activities, especially those that are forbidden or haram. But the real scenario is just the opposite.

The decay in morality is the major problem of our society. The society is now fully distorted with corruption, hypocrisy, bribery and other immoral acts. Apart from a few, those who are at or near the power-centre are involved in immoral activities to fulfill their vested interest without any compunction. In essence, although the number of practicing Muslims has increased, religion has failed to uphold morality in the society. The rules of law in sound politics originate from universal ethics.

Driving away all ethics, politics has become submerged in corruption -- not only in our country but also in developed countries. The mentors of politics in the developed world are the multi-national companies, whose prime objective is to achieve profits and accumulate capital unethically by propagating a doctrine of pervasive consumerism among the people. For instance, the unjust and inhuman war against Saddam Hossain initiated by US can be cited.

Behind the scene, the actual initiators of this war were multi-national companies, who wanted to capture the oil-fields of Iraq. The recent disclosure of misappropriation of public money by some British MP's is also an example of erosion of ethics in the politics of the developed world.

However, the politics of the developed world is still, to some extent, based on rule of law. But in Bangladesh, along with other third world countries, the rule of law is virtually absent. All-pervasive corruption, exploitation, misappropriation of public

Religion reminds the people of the Day of Judgment to enhance their morality. To regulate the society, religion has also prescribed punishment in this world for immoral activities. On the other hand, politics, following secular principles, tries to establish rule of law in the society. The rules of law in sound politics originate from universal ethics.

Morality lies in the hearts of the people.

funds etc. are common features of our country. Apart from a few, politicians in general care little about this. Rather, power hungry and greedy politicians with the cooperation of corrupt bureaucrats and businessmen have distorted and criminalised our political arena.

To change the scenario and to re-establish ethics in politics, the common people must come forward. For this, waiting for a leader or an organisation will be a waste of time. Rather, people of different regions should protest unit-



Morality lies in the hearts of the people.

edly, like in Kansat or Shanir Akhra, against powerful, greedy and corrupt leaders. Such united peoples' movements in different places will bring back ethics in local politics and produce leaders of the people. In this way, if ethics in local politics is established then, eventually, ethics will be re-established at the centre too. This bottom-up approach may bring light to our politics in future.

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