

Iran, Beacon of Liberty?

By REUEL MARC GERECHT

ON Thursday, the birthday of the Islamic Republic of Iran, we will see whether the democratic opposition movement has been driven underground by the increasingly brutal harassment from the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iranian society has become like molten rock under high pressure: more eruptions are inevitable. And if the dissidents can take to the streets, they will.

In any case, the fraudulent June 12 presidential elections and the subsequent internal tumult ought to make us wonder what would happen if Iran actually went democratic. President Obama and his advisers — still devoted to engagement and the hope that Iran's nuclear-weapons program can be peacefully derailed (despite [Tehran's stepping up of its enrichment program](#) this week), and probably skeptical that Ayatollah Khamenei and his Revolutionary Guards Corps could lose power — have likely spent little time envisioning a region where the Islamic Republic as we have known it no longer exists. At least, nobody from the administration's foreign-policy brain trust has laid out any plans for that contingency.

But given the troubles facing Ayatollah Khamenei, the near certainty that the clerical regime is going to get a lot nastier soon and the momentous possibilities of a democratic Iran, the White House should give it some thought. Mr. Khamenei is confronting a democracy movement that has grown larger despite an almost total lack of organization and charismatic leadership.

Iran's militarized theocracy will survive or perish depending on the strength of the Revolutionary Guards, the praetorian branch of the military that has become a self-sustaining fundamentalist conglomerate. Yet many guardsmen and their children, like the children of the clerical elite, are graduates of Iran's best universities. And if there is one factor that has inclined Iranians toward the opposition, it has been higher education — a point the regime has surely noted when it comes to the probable loyalties of the country's nuclear physicists.

In fact, many rank-and-file guardsmen voted for Mohammad Khatami, the reformist candidate, in the 1997 presidential election, even though their senior officers detested him. It's likely this schism remains.

The funeral in December of the regime's *bête noire*, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, where hundreds of thousands turned out, suggests the regime may also be encountering resistance from the clerical establishment.

The senior clergymen of the holy city of Qum have never had any regard for Ayatollah Khamenei's religious credentials and political pretensions; their quiescence has been achieved through intimidation by the regime and their inability to see any political alternative. But part of Ayatollah Montazeri's appealing dissent, which has been echoed by other Shiite clerics since his death, is that the Islamic Republic doesn't have to change much for the differences to be telling. Just freeing the Parliament from unelected clerical oversight would be a revolutionary step.

We will likely know in the coming months if the opposition can draw into the streets larger numbers of the mostazafan, "the oppressed poor," who have been the popular bedrock of the regime since the 1979 revolution. The economic "reforms" that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has planned will probably worsen Iran's already debilitating inflation and unemployment. An opposition combining the young mullahs, college-educated bureaucrats within Iran's bloated civil service and a significant slice of the urban poor could be too diverse for the guards, a partly conscripted force, to suppress.

The guards rose to prominence defending the homeland against an Iraqi invader; they have not yet shown that they have the fortitude to kill their countrymen like the Russian secret police or the Chinese Red Guards. Note how much time and effort the regime has spent to deflect blame for the killing of one young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, in the post-election rioting last summer. A self-confident regime would have killed unapologetically. Senior guardsmen may want to unleash a bloodbath to preserve the status quo, but Ayatollah Khamenei, who lacks the cold-blooded will of the state's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, doesn't seem to want to slaughter Iranians or make himself a hostage of his henchmen.

When regimes start to crack, the unthinkable becomes thinkable. Ayatollah Khamenei's supporters could start to wonder whether their influence could survive in a more open political system. Iranian journalists are reporting that former guardsmen who've joined the opposition are signaling their one-time brothers that they could have a soft landing in a new order. However much the regime has worked to brainwash its security force ("the bulwark against disbelief"), if more Iranians are killed, rank-and-file guardsmen may suspend their belief and choose not to shoot.

A democratic revolution in Tehran could well prove the most momentous Mideastern event since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. A politically freer Iran would bring front and center the great Islamic debate of our times: How can one be both a good Muslim and a democrat? How does one pay homage to Islamic law but give ultimate authority to the people's elected representatives? How can a Muslim import the best of the West without suffering debilitating guilt?

To an extent seen in no other country, Iran's intellectuals have battled and evolved over these questions. For a century, the country has been trying to develop constitutional

government. For 30 years, dissident clerics and lay intellectuals have struggled to reassert the democratic promise in the revolution.

Especially for religious dissidents, democracy is now seen as a keystone of a more moral order, where the faith can no longer be used to countenance dictatorship. An operating assumption of [President Obama's speech to the Islamic world](#) in Cairo last year is that Washington can work with authoritarian regimes against extremism — that Muslims don't need to be politically free to tame religious militancy. But the evolution of Christianity, which never had Islam's deep fusion of church and state, tells us something different: that it has been the West's political evolution — from autocracy to democracy — which has, more than anything, depoliticized Christianity.

The same process is happening to Islam in Iran, but at a much faster pace than anything seen in the West. As a result, millions of Iranians — the sons and daughters of once faithful revolutionaries — have secularized. Whereas secularizing Westernized autocracies like the shah's prompted upwellings of religious radicalism, Iran's religious dictatorship has produced a softening secularization that is likely to last, since both nonreligious and faithful Iranians increasingly see representative government as indispensable to their values.

The impact of all this on Muslims everywhere is likely to be profound. In the Middle East, the Iranian Revolution catapulted Islamic fundamentalism into the foreground. An Iranian democratization couldn't help but shake Sunni fundamentalists who, too, have wrestled with the tension between the Holy Law and voting. Sunni Arabs often like to pretend that they live in a different world from their Shiite Iranian cousins, but the truth is the opposite: cross-fertilization has been enormous. With Iranian democracy growing, liberal Arabs and Sunni Islamists would become much bolder in their demands.

Iran's transformation would also remind Turkey's ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party, whose commitment to democratic values has been increasingly shaky, that an authoritarian path creates revolt. And an Iranian democracy would powerfully affect Iraq, whose elected government has struggled with its own Tehran-backed demons. A democratic Iran would have little sympathy for Iraqis who prefer autocracy and religious militancy.

A democratic Tehran would also likely reduce its aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Baathist dictatorship in Syria. Palestinian fundamentalists who now receive substantial Iranian financing would also likely be a subject of heavy debate in a free Parliament, as would aid to other radical Sunni groups throughout the Middle East and Tehran's disconcerting contacts with Al Qaeda (which were detailed by the 9/11 commission report). Iran could easily become what Ayatollah Khomeini had wished — the model that transforms the Middle East — albeit not in the manner he hoped for.

Last, a democratic Iran would bring the reopening of the American Embassy, a symbolic measure of the highest significance that has long been popular among ordinary Iranians. The “Great Satan” would be no more.

President Obama has nothing to lose by moving away from engaging Ayatollah Khamenei and toward a vigorous engagement with the Iranian people’s quest for popular sovereignty. Rhetoric, sanctions aimed at cutting off Iran’s gasoline imports and intelligent covert aid to dissidents should be harnessed to the democratic cause. President Obama has an openly willing partner in the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, to make Iranian liberté a trans-Atlantic affair.

The administration should have no illusions: Ayatollah Khamenei’s regime is irretrievably paranoid. In its eyes, Western states, which have so far done next to nothing to help the democracy movement, are as culpable as the dissidents for Iran’s troubles. The supreme leader will seek ways to get even. And he isn’t going to give up his nukes. But a democratic Iran probably would.

Without the bogeyman of a Great Satan and the militant dream of regional hegemony, a Persian Parliament, overwhelmed with the people’s demands, would find much better things than enriched uranium to spend the nation’s money on. And if the clerical regime cracks, Mr. Obama will get credit. In no other endeavor, foreign or domestic, is the president likely to earn as much.

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