

Iran's Generation of Outsiders

This summer, an Iranian court reduced the prison sentence of 45-year-old Akbar Ganji, an investigative journalist and prominent dissident, from ten to six years. Two months earlier, another critic of the regime—Ali Afshari—made a televised confession, stating that he had conspired to overthrow the state. Viewers watched as a weary and dazed Afshari, an influential 27-year-old leader in the country's largest student organization, admitted to encouraging students to organize sit-ins and other forms of rebellion. Afshari laced his contrived confession with apologies to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Afshari's statements gave the impression that he could be charged with "fighting against God," a crime that carries the death penalty in Iran. From the outside, the two events appeared paradoxical: why would the regime exercise leniency toward one dissident only to force another to confess to crimes that could result in his execution?

This contradiction offers great insight into the tumultuous state of affairs inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a former commander in Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Ganji had helped establish the republic two decades ago. Regardless of the crime of which he was convicted—damaging state security—the establishment considers him an "insider"; consequently, he enjoys some degree of immunity. There is talk in Iran that Ganji will be freed long before his six-year term is up. Afshari, on the other hand, is a member of a new generation of Iranian leaders who are trying to enact profound reform. He is considered an "outsider" and, although his public criticisms may be no more blistering than Ganji's, Afshari does not enjoy the same immunity from

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prosecution. The distinction between “insider” and “outsider” (*khodi* and *gheir-e khodi* in Persian) is used to distinguish the players within the system—whatever their views are—from those people whose ideas are intolerable.

The Generational Divide

Among the greatest obstacles to fundamental change in Iran is a generational divide separating the country’s youth from the establishment. Nearly every week, high-ranking leaders of the state, including Khamenei and President Mohammad Khatami, pay lip service to the younger generation—which constitutes more than 50 percent of the population—proclaiming that they are the country’s future leaders and encouraging them to become engaged politically. Yet the current leaders give the youth no public forum in which to express their ideas—banning most rallies in universities since autumn 2000. Islamic enforcers deployed by the leader’s office or by branches of official law enforcement possess unofficial permission to enter college campuses at will. An entire apparatus of informants dominates the universities, keeping watch on the degree of disenchantment with the regime among the country’s youth. Additionally, student publications are routinely shut down and activists detained.

Afshari’s greatest transgression, according to officials, was his statement at a rally in autumn 2000 that the people of Iran should choose the country’s supreme leader, whom a body of conservative clerics currently appoints, by means of a national referendum. Such a notion, although thoroughly consistent with the goals of many of the original Iranian revolutionaries, threatens the conservative establishment’s monopoly on power. Thus, Afshari’s harsh punishment was inevitable, lest his thousands of young followers emulate his bold rebellion.

In recent years, both Afshari and Ganji had undergone transformations. Ganji, an intellectual with a Marxist bent and a fondness for quoting Hegel and Kant, went through a great deal of soul-searching and emerged as a self-proclaimed reformer who advocates the creation of a democratic system within the Islamic state. As the progressive press flourished during Khatami’s first two years in office, Ganji used the newspapers as a forum for his ideas. He ran into trouble with the government because of a series of investigative articles in which he accused the older revolutionaries in power of engaging in corruption and plotting the murders of dissident secular intellectuals in the late 1990s. Ganji claimed that former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who still wields enormous power within the establishment, condoned other murders dating back to the early 1990s, when he was president. The accusations not only damaged Rafsanjani’s personal and po-

litical reputation but also, more significantly, tainted the legacy of the revolution itself. If one of the architects of the Islamic Republic—ostensibly created to give rise to social justice and an Islamic community of believers—had engaged in corruption and murder, what did this revelation say about the principles and ethics of the entire ruling establishment?

Ganji was forced to pay for his public criticisms. The establishment used Ganji's attendance at a conference in Berlin, Germany, in spring 2000—which Afshari also attended—as a pretext to bring charges against him. A revolutionary court convicted him of trying to overthrow the Islamic regime because he aired his criticism of the status quo in Iran at the conference and because he "violat[ed] Islamic values." In comparison, the statement at the 2000 rally by Afshari was no more of a threat than Ganji's pronouncements, but the government judged Afshari's comment to have exceeded the limits allowed for critical analysis of the system. Adding to the perceived threatening situation was Afshari's audience—primarily university students.

The Student Movement

The conservative establishment has learned a great deal from the history of Iran's student movement. Until the 1979 Islamic revolution, the student movement—repressed by the Pahlavi dynasty—had been the mechanism most actively promoting social change. Students' poetry readings in Tehran sparked a series of events that eventually brought down the shah's government. By 1977, students were organizing protest rallies across the country, and Islamic associations at universities had become active. During the early days of the revolution, students turned the universities into headquarters of political activity.

Khatami's focus on attracting university students to his campaign when he first ran for president in 1997 was no accident. Appearing at the Tehran headquarters of the *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, the principal student umbrella group, in the winter before announcing his candidacy, Khatami pulled a miniature constitution from his pocket and vowed to protect the rule of law. He knew that university students were tired of their vulnerability to law enforcement intrusions on campuses, and he appealed to their yearning for a leader who could stop this violation of human rights. The students came to consider Khatami a maverick, a rare Iranian leader who would fight for political pluralism and free expression within a more tolerant Islamic system.

After the students helped elect Khatami, however, he failed to keep his promise to defend the rule of law. Two weeks after students had risked their lives in July 1999, in the most violent public demonstrations since the aftermath of the revolution, Khatami sided with the establishment and publicly

reprimanded the students for their rebellion. After the protests, Khatami went to the city of Hamadan to speak before the town's youth, and the nation eagerly anticipated what he would say. I remember standing in the crowds of young men, who were so excited to see the president that they tried to dismantle rows of steel barricades to move closer to his podium. Ambulances took many students away after they passed out from the heat and the excitement.

But instead of instilling confidence in his foot soldiers who were fighting in the streets for change, the president betrayed them. Khatami notably

A generational divide separates Iran's youth from its establishment.

conceded that the attack on the Tehran University dormitories by hard-line thugs and police—the incident that precipitated the student protests—was a crime, but he rewrote the history of the events that followed during the next five days, when pro-democracy students staged protests on campuses across the country. Islamic militia members beat students with clubs during these demonstrations, in which ordinary people also participated. In the town of Tabriz, the scene of

the worst violence, the militia created what they called “a tunnel of death” and forced the student demonstrators to pass through this gauntlet, beating them as they did so. Nevertheless, by publicly denying that violence had been inflicted on the students, Khatami apparently considered defending the integrity of the system more important than telling the truth. The conservative establishment—including Khamenei—backed the law enforcement agencies’ hard-liners who had beaten the students.

Khatami told the crowd in Hamadan, “My dear ones, today, in order to put down riots and in order to put out the flames of violence for the nation, others use tanks, armored cars, and heavy weapons. Our forces did not use firearms to tackle the rioting. The disturbance was put down calmly and without resorting to firearms.” His statement, however, was a distortion of the facts. I was in the streets on the final day of the protests and witnessed plainclothes members of the security forces jumping from speeding Mercedes-Benz sedans to open fire along the city’s long boulevards. Thousands of students, some of whom I had met earlier in the day as they staged a sit-in in front of the Interior Ministry downtown, fled in all directions. Some hid in buildings along Vali-e Asr, a main street. A full accounting of the dead and injured has never been made public, although anecdotal evidence suggests that many likely died.

The student uprising, which lasted six days that July and inspired the participation of ordinary Iranians, changed the near-term aspirations of the

country's youth. The more radical students within the Daftar began charting their own course, away from the organization's leadership, which largely complied with the desires of Khatami and the mainstream reform movement. Over the next year, students such as Afshari became more outspoken and, in the eyes of the regime, far more dangerous. Afshari's experience mirrors the fate of much of the new generation of political leaders, whose constant radicalization has found them pushed to the "outside" of the Islamic system by the "insiders"—both conservatives and mainstream reformers alike.

Khatami and the Alternatives

The July 1999 uprising made some students realize that Khatami and the mainstream reform movement would never provide the leadership the students had expected. At a press conference at Daftar headquarters, Afshari and his peers voiced their thoughts. As expressed by one student leader:

The majority of students, not just the politicized ones, have felt a national obligation to defend their rights and those of the nation in general. They have done this in different ways throughout history. Today, the students feel fooled on both sides—beaten up and then condemned. They think this was part of a big plot to take away the small freedoms they have gained.

Afshari, then in the early days of his radicalization, was more diplomatic at the press conference than he was during later months. "If we take a deep analytical look, we see [that] the events of last week are a manifestation of the government's inability to address what the nation wants and calls for," stated Afshari, the head of the Daftar's political bureau at the time. "The government ignored these calls, creating an atmosphere ready for trouble," he said at the July 1999 press conference. Afshari disputed the government's claims that students with alleged ties to U.S.-based "spies and Zionists" had instigated the protests. Afshari expressed his belief that Iran's problems stemmed from within the country.

Beginning at that time, Afshari and others both inside and outside the Daftar watched as sham justice came to bear on the Islamic enforcers who had beaten the pro-democracy demonstrators that summer. When a trial was finally held, only a few low-level police officers and several conscripts were convicted, then given light sentences. The real perpetrators—the Islamic *basij* militia and a special force of enforcers deployed directly from Khamanei's office—were never charged with a crime.

Students also witnessed the system's betrayal of older political figures whom they considered idols. One progressive cleric, Mohsen Kadivar, who

had attracted a large following among university and seminary students, was imprisoned for 18 months primarily for writing a series of essays in which he claimed that repression under the conservative establishment was just as severe as it had been under the shah. Fellow cleric Abdollah Nouri, a former vice president and interior minister, was sent to jail for political and religious dissent. Nouri, widely admired by the country's youth for both his piety and his heartfelt, if somewhat belated, defense of civic rights, used his trial as a platform to condemn the system. He called for the release of Aya-

tollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, another influential cleric who had campaigned for human rights for decades and was placed under house arrest in 1997. Students shouted for the release of these three clerics at university rallies before the government banned them. According to one student slogan, "Nouri speaks and the monopolists tremble;" a frequent chant of the students was "Free Nouri and Kadivar." Slogans supporting Montazeri,

previously the height of political daring, became commonplace.

As the government sent journalists and other Iranians fighting for justice to prison, with Khatami declining to defend them, a faction that believed that civil disobedience was the only way to reform the system began developing inside the Daftar. In autumn 2000, at a conference in Isfahan, the conflict between the radical and mainstream factions of the student movement burst into the open. The conference ended without resolution. One Daftar leader, Muhammad Mehdi Tabatabaei, who represented the views of Khatami's mainstream reform movement, told me shortly after the Isfahan conference that the students had to refrain from rebellion. "I believe our political situation is like a chess game, not a boxing match," said Tabatabaei. "In chess, you play to win, not to knock out your opponent. I believe that the reform movement requires patience and wisdom. I am completely against inspiring people to create turmoil."

The mere suggestion that university students were considering a plan of civil disobedience—staging sit-ins on campuses and organizing illegal rallies—triggered alarm as well as contempt within the conservative establishment. Based on interviews with radical student leaders, I wrote an article in the *Guardian* about the civil disobedience campaign. The article was the first indication in the foreign press that the Daftar was split and that the radicals had decided to force a faster pace toward reform. After the conservative Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* reprinted the story, I was labeled a Western spy. Subsequent articles in *Kayhan* concluded that the British government was trying to foment a second revolution in Iran. Because I

Current leaders give youth no public forum in which to express their ideas.

wrote for a British newspaper, and Iranians assume that Western newspapers are under the control of their respective governments, *Kayhan* concluded that the British were encouraging students to revolt.

The establishment's harsh reaction to the article was enough to silence the students. Several weeks passed before they were willing to risk holding illegal rallies on university campuses. The students also feared that Afshari, who was already in jail, would have to pay for the leak about their civil disobedience campaign. Ensuing events proved that the students had been correct. According to family members, in the months leading up to Afshari's televised "confession," he had been in solitary confinement and had been tortured. For many weeks, neither his family nor his lawyer knew the location of his incarceration. International human rights organizations appealed to Khamenei and Khatami to no avail.

Who's to Blame?

When Khatami was first elected, he was perceived as a different kind of Iranian leader. Although he was part of the older revolutionary generation, he seemed determined to create a movement among the younger revolutionaries who could work for change in their posts inside the government. In the February 2000 election, the principal players in the mainstream reform movement worked to win seats in Parliament. In February 1999, the first local (village, town, and city council) elections in Iranian history also produced electoral victories for many candidates claiming to belong to the reform movement. The reformers' success in four consecutive elections, including Khatami's own 2001 landslide victory, appeared to be a sufficient harbinger of a new kind of national leadership that would emerge and leave its mark on state policy.

This change has not taken place. The reform-dominated national Parliament is ineffective; the powers of the presidency have been so diluted that Khatami has repeatedly complained publicly that he lacks sufficient authority to govern; and the city councils never absorbed the power that should have trickled down from the central government. Much of the blame has been placed on the conservative establishment, which has blocked the reformers' influence at every turn.

A more fundamental problem, however, lies with Iran's failure to move beyond the Islamic revolution of two decades ago. For example, all political discussion is held in the context of the revolution; any aspiring political figure is required to have revolutionary credentials; and the ideological rhetoric bombarding Iranians—in the newspapers and on television—is steeped in revolutionary symbolism and terminology. This symbolism extends to

Tehran's highways and vast boulevards, where kitschy depictions of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and images of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq War beam from large billboards. Anti-American slogans and rhetoric, another key ingredient in perpetuating the revolution, fill the media to the point of being a daily obsession. Underlying this rhetoric is a significant message: Iran still blames the outside world for its internal political and social problems.

Younger leaders no longer blame the 'imperialist' world for Iran's domestic problems.

One of the greatest distinctions between the younger generation of leaders who are prevented from emerging onto the political scene, such as Afshari, and their predecessors is that the younger leaders no longer blame the "imperialist" world for Iran's domestic problems. By publicly stating that the regime should not blame the outside world for the country's unrest—even though many in the clerical establishment repeatedly did assign that blame during the troubled days that followed the July 1999 demonstrations—Afshari separated him-

self from the older leadership. As long as Iran's leaders continue to blame internal crises on the outside world, the country's political development will be stymied, and modernity will remain an elusive goal.

In almost three years as a foreign correspondent in the Islamic Republic of Iran, I often tried to broach the idea of an emerging "postrevolutionary" Iran with lay intellectuals, senior members of the political clergy, established activists, and newspaper editors and commentators. More often than not, they rebuffed my overtures. I perceived a compelling unwillingness, even on the part of powerful critics within the system, to imagine contemporary Iran without its revolution. "To be postrevolutionary would mean to be antirevolutionary," said Ayatollah Abdolkarim Mousavi-Ardebili, the republic's first judiciary chief and now a progressive theologian. "We need our revolution." During the same interview, when asked if he believed that there should a corrective process rectifying the mistakes the revolutionaries made once they began running the government, he replied, "The revolution does not need correcting."

Indications abound that most of Iran's leadership agrees with Mousavi-Ardebili. Twenty-two years after the overthrow of the shah, the Islamic Republic is predicated almost solely on its leaders' perceptions of revolutionary truths. Despite some positive changes in society—for example, marked improvement in literacy rates, availability of electricity and even telephone service in many remote villages, and women's larger academic presence (they now make up more than half of the university student population)—the country's record on social and economic development remains spotty at best.

Living standards are low, and the huge post-1979 baby-boom generation threatens to overwhelm the economy's limited ability to generate new jobs and opportunities. In fact, the only growth market seems to be in revolutionary rhetoric and its spin-offs—martyrdom and xenophobia.

The result is a system clinging to its past in dread of a future for which it is entirely unprepared. The modernizing instincts of Khatami and his circle are but a feeble continuation of a trend dating back to the Constitutional Revolution almost 100 years ago. Current leaders' efforts have not fulfilled their ambitious goal to lead the nation toward a political system that is both authentically Islamic and recognizably democratic. This aim was the underlying promise of the Khatami phenomenon, one that the Iranian electorate recognized and endorsed enthusiastically in 1997.

The intervening four years have revealed the weakness of both the voters and their chosen champion. More fundamentally, recent events have underscored the degree to which the ruling establishment—whether in its conservative or reformist guise—is unprepared to share power with anyone from the “outside,” including would-be leaders from the ranks of a new, postrevolutionary generation, such as Afshari and the tens of thousands of students who support him. The current environment inspires little hope that a new generation of leaders will be allowed to enter the corridors of power.

