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Beating their chests and clad in black, a procession of young men and women filed toward the gates of Tehran's Amir Kabir Polytechnic University on February 23. The mourners -- drawn primarily from the ranks of the Basij militia and unaffiliated hardline Islamist vigilantes -- were carrying the remains of five unknown soldiers, martyred during the 1980-88 war with Iraq, to campus, where they intended to rebury them. Inside the gates, a gathering of angry students had assembled to protest what they saw as a blatant show of state force, and when the procession crossed onto campus, a confrontation ensued. Students claimed the fight pitted 1,500 protesters against a smaller group of mourners, most of whom were armed with clubs, knives and martial arts weapons.¹ Security forces arrested more than 70 of their number, the students reported, and nine were hospitalized. In subsequent days, more student activists were picked up in police raids, and at press time, some of them were still in detention.

State-affiliated media portrayed the events differently. They maintained that only "50 persons" had "created tensions" by provoking the mourners and attacking the dignity of the martyrs. A pro-Ahmadinejad news bureau reported that a small student "militia" had attacked the otherwise peaceful ceremony.² The media outlet continued to accuse these "extremists" of trying to tear up mourning banners and shouting "slogans against The Order" -- that is, against the political-religious system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On their weblogs, members of Student Basij -- a state-funded student organization affiliated with the paramilitary Basij, which was created under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979 -- explained that they had shown restraint in the face of verbal and bodily abuse and insults.³ Indeed, the Basijis claimed, only the student protesters had resorted to violence at Amir Kabir.

The phenomenon of martyr burials at universities has a history. The idea was first floated in 2003, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, current patron of the Basijis, was mayor of Tehran and it has been hotly contested ever since. The leading student group, the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, have long objected to the notion, raising the slogan, "Don't turn universities into graveyards!" Students condemn the burials as political manipulations, a way for the hardline establishment to impose upon the university milieu a militant ideology that praises "martyrdom" and promotes military values associated with the Revolutionary Guards, to which the Basij is now officially subordinate. The students feel that since the Iran-Iraq war and austere days of the immediate post-revolutionary period are over, the militant ideology is obsolete. They call for the rule of law and transparent, accountable government, instead of the unquestioning loyalty to the clerical hierarchy that is the hallmark of the Basij and

their social peers. The interments are also a practical means of clamping down on student activism: Gatherings are prohibited near the tombs of martyrs for any purpose other than mourning. Thus, the students see the burials as part of a state strategy to suppress dissident voices within Iran's lively university environment.

Several martyr burials took place on campuses before the February 23 events, however most of them in universities dominated by Islamist students. Amir Kabir was the last university chosen as a burial ground, because the authorities were well aware of the school's reputation as a hotbed of radical dissidence and knew there would be clashes. In the weeks leading up to February 23, students reported a tense atmosphere as outside elements came onto campus to lay the groundwork. The day before the actual burials, Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, issued a statement hailing the martyrs and stating that the youth of today is indebted to these "unknown war heroes." The declaration was plainly a blessing from Iran's highest authority for the ensuing operation. As in many other countries, universities in Iran are key arenas of the political and ideological battles in the broader society. The conflict over martyr burials, the latest in a series of confrontations between dissident students and the Islamic Republic's authorities and supporters, reveal the deeper rifts in Iranian society on the eve of the presidential election slated for June 12.

Contested Space

Under the Pahlavis, universities harbored the main movement against the Shah that played a pivotal role in the 1978-1979 revolution. That movement was ideologically diverse, encompassing Marxists and liberals as well as Islamists. It was radical Islamist students, however, whose voices grew louder as the revolution proceeded, and it was they who stormed and occupied the US Embassy in 1980. The same year, Khomeini closed down the universities to curb the secular opposition; during the ensuing "cultural revolution," institutions of higher learning were thoroughly "Islamized." Many spots in incoming classes were allocated to loyalist forces, in particular to young war veterans from lower income strata of society. On campus, morality police and intelligence agents rooted out dissenters. The universities were firmly in the grip of the state apparatus. In the 1990s, however, alternative voices slowly emerged. Mobilizing the 1970s baby boom generation, a reformist student movement spearheaded the surprisingly effective grassroots campaign that led to President Mohammad Khatami's landslide election of 1997. For a brief period, pro-democracy activity blossomed at Iranian universities. The activists of this period wished to strengthen the country's quasi-democratic institutions and limit the power of unelected clerical bodies such as The Guardians Council. Thus, the goal for most student activists was not to abolish the Islamic Republic, but rather to reform and 'democratize' the religious-political system.

The conservatives responded in July 1999 when security forces and vigilantes stormed the dormitories of Tehran University. Scores of students were wounded and one killed. The following week, riots exploded throughout Iran in what seemed to be the most widespread unrest since the revolution. As disgruntled youth took to the streets, military commanders threatened to intervene. In the aftermath, authorities severely repressed the student movement. Khatami's weak and vague attempts to stem the repression fueled student radicalization as many came to see reformism as little but veiled conformism. Frustrated with the fickle politicians of the reformist movement,

student groups initiated a painful divorce from Khatami and his coalition. The Office for the Consolidation of Unity announced that it would henceforth concentrate on making change at the grassroots, such as protecting and expanding the budding Iranian civil society groups.⁴ Other students went ‘underground’, where they were able to discuss more radical democratic, secular and Marxist ideas.

The 2005 election of Ahmadinejad -- a severe defeat for the reformists that was partly due to student boycotts -- has posed a fresh challenge to Iranian students and other proponents of greater democracy. Ahmadinejad is a staunchly hardline Islamist with the declared goal of reviving Khomeini’s revolutionary tenets. Among Ahmadinejad’s many far-reaching decisions since taking office is his attempt at revitalizing the “cultural revolution” of the early 1980s. Echoing years of frustrated conservative rhetoric about the loss of their foothold on campus, his aim is to “re-Islamize” the universities. Among other things, Ahmadinejad’s government has fired “liberal” and “secular” faculty, installed loyal officials in key positions and strengthened the branches of Student Basij.

Thus, it seems that Ahmadinejad has unwillingly provided new impetus for the pro-democracy student movement. Despite the ever-increasing control of the state, there have been clear signs of discontent almost since the outset of Ahmadinejad’s term. In November 2005, students forced Ahmadinejad to reverse his decision to appoint a cleric as head of Tehran University; in December 2006, students shouting “Death to the dictator!” interrupted Ahmadinejad’s speech at Amir Kabir University; in October 2007, student protesters at Tehran University likened the visiting president to the late Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet; and in December 2008, thousands of students at major universities throughout Iran marked Students’ Day with anti-government demonstrations. The 2008 protests were so severe that Ayatollah Khamenei was compelled to cancel a campus visit.

The protests against the martyr burials are also protests against Ahmadinejad’s government. The pro-democratic students see Ahmadinejad and his faction as representatives of an ultra-conservative culture, an authoritarian and fascist approach to politics and a violent interpretation of Islam. The recent burials are thus seen as part of the conservative program to regain control of the universities and other public spaces. This program is also executed in the streets of major cities throughout Iran, where Basij and police patrols campaign against *bad-hejâbi*, that is, indecent clothing. The current “cultural revolution” is presented as a counter-attack on the *tahâjom-e farhangi*, or “Western cultural invasion,” which the conservatives profess to espy and which they see as a threat to traditional and revolutionary values among Iranian youth. With the martyr tombs, the authorities have established a permanent, visible presence in a contested physical space as well as a convenient excuse for giving external “pressure groups” access to the academic sanctuary.

Champion of the Dispossessed

It is not only the proponents of greater democracy like the Office for the Consolidation of Unity who are active in the university milieu. With stepped-up state support, Islamist organizations such as Student Basij have also become more influential. Most are ardent supporters of Ahmadinejad, whom they see as the last bulwark against a tide of moral corruption and foreign aggression. Islamist students’

blogs and Internet forums reveal the profound differences in outlook among Iranian youths, as embodied in the February 23 mourners and their adversaries. Writing on February 24 on his blog *Upside Down*, the Islamist Mohammad Elias summarized those differences:

Those who oppose martyr burials at universities say that this action turns martyrs into something omnipresent and commonplace. Well, what could be better to make omnipresent and commonplace than martyrs and martyrdom? Where does this idea that martyrs should only be buried in the martyrs' section of the graveyard come from? It is modern materialism that ostracizes the dead, and with its baseless separations and differentiations, [materialism demands that] martyrs be cast out to some distant place, so that the nightmare of death does not disturb its carnal sleep.⁵

Another Basiji blogger, writing at *Living Corpse* on February 25, allowed that the protesters were, to some extent, right to claim that Basijis use the martyr burials to pursue political goals:

We are not afraid to say that we aim at extending the culture of martyrdom to the whole universe. The university didn't take much effort: We will even conquer the White House and bury a martyr in the courtyard!... We see a university without a martyr as a graveyard. We see a university, where people such as you study and belch out words of anti-Islamism, socialism and liberalism, as a graveyard.... We believe that the martyrs are not dead; they are alive.⁶

The martyr burials are connected to an Islamist culture that praises martyrdom as the ultimate sacrifice for the community of believers and for God. It is not simply a question of factional squabbling between reformists and conservatives within the Islamic Republic: Deep, existential issues of ideology, ethics and faith, and the struggle among the different cultures of Iran, are at stake. In his personal account of the February 23 events, Basiji student Ali Allahyari points to a moral rather than a political conflict:

After briefly paying my respects [at the martyrs' tomb], I saw that a small number [of protesters] had gone into the cafeteria where they started to harass and abuse sisters [female students] who were eating their food. [The protesters] had thought that we guys, like them, were without honor! They hadn't realized that a Muslim protects the honor not only of his own kin, but also that of others.⁷

Allahyari describes how furious his fellow Basijis were at the scene in the cafeteria, but that he had intervened to prevent bloodshed. Such statements are typical of the Basiji discourse: opponents are portrayed not only as political deviants but as decadent and perverted.⁸ The Basiji, on the contrary, is one who will stand up for the honor of others, protect traditional values and defend public order against anarchy. Such a portrayal echoes a central worry of many pious Iranians: that reformism, democratic change and the influx of Western culture will undermine the religious identity of Iran. Conservatives see social corrosion appearing in the form of drug abuse, crime, prostitution and teenage suicide -- all of which are very real and evident problems in Iranian society. They link these phenomena with the perceived spread of social anomie, promiscuity, nihilism, secularism, the "obscene" or "Western" behavior and clothing of many youngsters, and even devil worship. Many Iranians from this

segment of society see Ahmadinejad as the hero who will rescue Iran from moral decay.

While the pro-democratic activist students generally seem to belong to the urban middle class, often hailing from families with secular views, the Basijis are mostly from humbler class origins and some from the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of southern Tehran. Rural families who immigrated to the city from poor provinces in the 1970s or 80s mostly populate these areas. Many Basijis hail from families whose survival depends on government subsidies and privileges arising from the Basiji or war veteran status of their sons or fathers. There is thus an element of social and cultural clash between the austere, conservative and highly religious world-view of those from lower classes and the moderately religious or even secular world-view of Iranians from the upper middle class. Issues such as the mingling of sexes and appropriate dress are just some of the many sites of contention between these two groups.

Conservatives thus view the upcoming presidential contest as a clash between the righteous, patriotic forces of Ahmadinejad and the decadent, nation-betraying reformists who have suggested rapprochement with the West. On an Internet forum, a student wrote about the Amir Kabir protesters: “Even though I hate them, I also feel sorry for those who have become instruments of people who do not have the guts to declare who they are; these unpaid mercenaries who work for them, these poor students who sacrifice themselves for their masters without getting paid or thanked.”

Conservatives often portray their domestic rivals as “agents” of foreign enemies, a fifth column unwittingly pursuing neo-imperialist powers’ agenda of sowing discord in Iran. This view is in line with a foundational myth of the Islamic Republic: that Iran is threatened on all sides by the schemes of arrogant superpowers in the West, and first and foremost the United States. It is also the product of a sort of “clash of civilizations” theory, the mirror image of that promulgated by the late Samuel Huntington, according to which, conservatives believe, the Muslim world is engaged in an epochal cultural war with the West. Islamist students thus deem their pro-democracy peers to be “sellouts” who have lost their Iranian identity amidst the Western cultural onslaught. Hamed Talebi, another Islamist blogger, recently wrote:

Why do all the revolution’s sworn enemies in the world -- who have never wanted what is good and expedient for Islamic Iran -- and the [domestic] reformists suddenly have this mutual understanding in opposing Ahmadinejad? Have our foreign enemies become well-intentioned toward us?! If not, what is this broad and historical consensus and understanding for?! They are all working frenetically against Ahmadinejad. But that’s OK. We too have a God.⁹

A like-minded reader, himself a conservative blogger, commented: “*Enshallah*, in the forthcoming election, the American reformists will be consigned to the graveyard of Iranian political history, and with the victory of Dr. Ahmadinejad, a crushing answer to the foreign enemy and its domestic followers will be given, once and for all.”

Return of the Smiling Mullah and Co.

Iran watchers were quick to attribute the February 23 confrontation at Amir Kabir University to maneuvering in advance of the presidential election. “The government of President Ahmadinejad is desperately trying to silence all independent voices ahead of the upcoming June election under any conceivable pretext. The university students are being targeted for their outspoken advocacy and defense of freedom of expression,” said Hadi Ghaemi, spokesman for the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

The atmosphere in Iran is indeed tense and uncertain. Mohammad Khatami, who was president for two terms between 1997 and 2005, announced on February 9 that he would join the presidential race, and then withdrew just over a month later. Before he dropped out, Mehdi Karroubi, who was speaker of Parliament from 1989-1992 and again from 2000-2004, and former Prime Minister Mir-Hosein Mousavi also put their names in the mix. Until recently, therefore there were three “moderate” or “reformist” candidates aiming to wrest the presidency from Ahmadinejad. Though there are clear signs of discontent with the president, it will not be an easy task to unseat him, as Khatami’s withdrawal may show. The president’s opponents face a host of obstacles. Khatami was the target of character assassination in the state-run media, perhaps signaling that the Supreme Leader would throw his weight behind Ahmadinejad (even though after Khatami’s withdrawal, this is now far from certain). Some also criticize the reformist bloc for not coming up with a new face and a new political program. In the words of the famous blogger Khorshid Khanum (Miss Sun):

Do the reformists have an actionable strategy or program, say, for truly reforming Iran’s economy...for reaching out to the layer of society engulfed by poverty and people who felt closer to Ahmadinejad [than Khatami] during last election? Do they really have a practical program for reforming the country’s educational system? Do they have a program for defending women’s rights? ... Dear reformists: Please present your programs. Apart from a choice between bad and worse, what reason is there for us to vote on you?

In an echo of 1999, Khatami himself did not stand up for the students at Amir Kabir, so as to avoid taking sides. A key member of his reformist coalition, Mostafa Tajzadeh, did state, “With the announcement of Khatami’s participation in the elections in mind, students and civil society activists should brace themselves for more and heavier pressures in the near future.... Because of the government’s negative actions at universities, the authoritarian camp knows that if the students are going to be active in the elections, it will definitely mean that the authoritarians will suffer a severe defeat.”¹⁰

Even with Khatami out, there is reason to fear that the remaining opposition candidates might split the “reformist” vote. A cleric with revolutionary credentials and a long political career, Karroubi has been quite vocal in criticizing the repression of students, Sufi dervishes, artists and human rights activists such as Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi. A week after the martyr burials, Karroubi was prevented from speaking at the university in Hamadan. Karroubi is not widely seen as a serious contender for the presidential post. Yet his populist slogans, such as his promises to give cash handouts from Iran’s oil income to all Iranians and his appeals to ethnic minority voters, may steal some of Ahmadinejad’s thunder. Karroubi has managed to win over some of Khatami’s erstwhile key supporters. Not all reformists see Karroubi as one of

their own, however, and the 72-year old cleric does not seem to have a wide base among the students.

After several months of deliberation, Mir-Hosein Mousavi announced his candidacy on March 10. Just like other reformists, Mousavi belongs to the so-called “traditional left wing”; as opposed to Khatami and Karroubi, however, he is not a cleric. His credentials as prime minister during the Iran-Iraq War are impeccable. An academic, painter and architect, Mousavi withdrew from politics after being ousted by Khamene‘i and his “right-wing” conservative allies in 1989 and devoted himself to the cultural scene. To some Iranians, Mousavi represents the early days of the revolution before factional rivalries and internal corruption had tarnished the state’s image. Mousavi’s quasi-socialist notions of an economy based on collective cooperatives might appeal to many people across the board, including hardline Islamists. It remains to be seen, however, if Mousavi can prosper in the Marxist-inspired political milieu found at many Iranian universities. Furthermore, his recent statements on combining the discourse of reformism with that of *osulgarâ‘i* (principle-ism, that is Khomeinist fundamentalism) can be seen as a sign of Mousavi currying favor with the same conservatives that the students are opposed to. Indeed, because of his credentials, Mousavi is certainly a man of the system, and radical pro-democracy students will see him as nothing more and nothing less.

Thus, the reformists might have gotten one thing right: that the deteriorating economy and social inequality are the number one concerns of most Iranians. However, most students are still disillusioned and pessimistic, and, as this entry at the Be Free blog shows, they have not forgotten Khatami’s -- and other reformists’ -- lack of support for political dissidents:

Why did Khatami join [this election]? Has he come to entertain people a little while the political system prepares its future programs? Has he come to tranquilize this nation’s twenty-something-year old pains so as to prepare it for future ones? What happened to eight years of talking -- and just talking -- about students? [This talk] has only resulted in the crowding of cells in Evin prison. In the last three years, while the universities were smeared in blood, where were you, Mr. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami?¹¹

This skepticism is likely to be transferred to other presidential candidates and national politicians who evoke the 1997-2005 “reformist moment” in their attempts to attract student support.

Another Iranian Surprise?

The conservative-dominated state uses martyr burials in Iranian universities as a means of intimidation against a crucial, but restive segment of the population. The interments are intended to reclaim a key social space that is “threatened” with secularization. Pro-democracy student activists are constantly harassed and beleaguered for one simple reason: Those in power see them as a potential peril.

The Amir Kabir protesters did not receive much attention in Iranian media, however, apart from the negative portrayals circulated by state-run news agencies. Indeed, the question is whether the latest incident redounded to the student activists’ advantage at all. The issue of martyrs is extremely sensitive, since the Iran-Iraq war was, by all

accounts, the most traumatic event in recent Iranian history. Most Iranians lost a family member during the war, and this living memory is certainly not limited to conservatives. Even though it is perfectly clear from the protesters' blogs and websites that they do not want to disrespect the martyrs, this might, nevertheless, be the conclusion that conservatives and others drew in February. Indeed, it has often been argued that radical pro-democracy groups have distanced themselves not only from the reformists, but also from the broad population. The students might have lost touch with reality in a society that has lost interest in grand notions of democracy and "dialogue of civilizations," to use Khatami's famous phrase, and is instead preoccupied with daily struggles for survival.

There is no doubt that the reformists have their eyes fixed on universities, hoping for a revival of the pro-reformist movement. Indeed, without their support, no reformist candidate will be able to mobilize the grassroots amongst the young, women, ethnic minorities and opposition circles that swept the reformists into power in 1997, 2000 and 2001 and that are needed for an election victory today. But the reformists cannot count on the students' support, unless they revise their tactics, program and image. It will take serious amends for past misdeeds and a much bolder and outspoken plan before the reformist movement can come alive again. So far, reformists have showed no sign of taking these steps and it remains to be seen if Mousavi can become a charismatic movement leader like Khatami used to be.

When Iran's 2 million students return from their Nowruz (Persian New Year) vacations at the beginning of April, Iranian universities will likely become political battlegrounds again, buzzing with controversy over candidates and their platforms. Many students, of course, will not care. Indifferent and apathetic, they will treat the whole election process as one big charade; others will take it seriously and treat it as a showdown between good and evil. With Iran's recent history in mind, it is too early to predict an election result or to dismiss the reformists completely. When Iranian voters go to the polls in June, the world might be in for another surprise.

For background on student-reformist tensions, see "'Our Letter to Khatami Was a Farewell': An Interview with Saeed Razavi-Faqih," *Middle East Report Online*, July 15, 2003. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero071503.html>

For background on Ahmadinejad's culture wars, see Azam Khatam, "The Islamic Republic's Failed Quest for the Spotless City," *Middle East Report* 250 (Spring 2009). <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer250/khatam.html>

¹ *Amir Kabir University Newsletter*, February 24, 2009. [Persian]

² *Rajanews.com*, February 23, 2009. [Persian]

³ See the post at <http://basijisiasi.parsiblog.com/851114.htm>. [Persian]

⁴ See Rasmus Christian Elling, "Reviewing and Redefining the Student Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Humanisierung der Bildung* (Germany/Russia) (Summer 2006).

⁵ See the post at <http://vajgoon.blogfa.com>. [Persian]

⁶ See the post at <http://jasadezende.ir>. [Persian]

⁷ See the post at <http://www.eilia13.ir>. [Persian]

⁸ For insight into Basij culture, see Fatemeh Sadeghi, “Foot Soldiers of the Islamic Republic’s ‘Culture of Modesty,’” *Middle East Report* 250 (Spring 2009).

⁹ See the March 10, 2009 post at <http://hamedtalebi.blogfa.com>. [Persian]

¹⁰ *Emrooz*, February 28, 2009. [Persian]

¹¹ See the February 20, 2009 post at <http://aaazaaadbaaash.blogspot.com/>. [Persian]