

Middle East

NAYEREH TOHIDI

The Islamist regime in Iran is in crisis, ideologically, economically and politically. A more visible sign of this crisis manifests itself in the factional conflict between the ruling conservatives who support an absolutist theocracy, i.e. the supreme rule of the jurisprudence (*velayat-e faqih*), and the reformists who are after a sort of Islamic pluralism, democracy and rule of law. But a more subtle and profound dimension of the present crisis is reflected in the growing disillusionment and frustration among the Iranian youth and students vented against the conservative's repressive policies.

Neither any opposition group, the eight-year war with Iraq, nor the often-blamed 'Great Satan' has dealt as serious a blow to the authority and legitimacy of the ruling Islamists in Iran as have their own children. Today, two decades after the 1979 Revolution that gave power to the Shi'a clerics in Iran, the majority of the children born and raised under the Islamist regime, do not identify with its ideology and dictated behavioural codes. The failure of the Islamic Republic in its cultural and ideological projects has recently manifested itself during two exhibitions of defiance by the youth: the spontaneous national jubilation over a game between Iranian and American football players in Lyon in June 1998, and the massive nation-wide student demonstration against state-run repression in July 1999.

Students have constituted one of the most dynamic forces in the recent history of Iran. They played a major role in the movements that paved the way to the 1979 Revolution and the downfall of the Shah. In the establishment of the Islamic Republic (IR) too, a large segment of the student body played a key role by taking over the American Embassy in 1980 and creating the 'hostage crisis'. The clerics then effectively manipulated students' passion and the 'hostage crisis' towards their own goals in the struggle for the state power, eliminating liberals, seculars and leftists from various organs of power, and eventually consolidating a theocratic rule. In their 'Cultural Revolution' campaign, the Islamist clerics pitted Islamist students against other groups and pursued violent suppression of any student organization supportive of secular and Islamic dissident trends on various campuses. They carried out ideological cleansing of faculty and administration and began screening student admissions on the basis of ideological and moral standards as necessary steps towards the 'Islamization' of universities. When this campaign met with resistance, the Revolutionary Council issued an order to close universities for two years beginning on 5 June 1980.

The success in suppressing the independent student movement and the subsequent co-optation of students and universities that lasted for over 15 years played a crucial role in the consolidation of the clerics' rule. They have been keen on closely linking traditional religious seminaries and modern universities, turning for example, the main quad of the Tehran University campus into the site of weekly Friday prayers led by conservative clerics.

In line with its initial populist nature and ongoing revolutionary rhetoric, the IR has promoted mobilization of the youth and students, especially during the war with Iraq. But this politicization of the youth, like that of women, has gradually turned into a double-edged sword for the conservatives, who have increasingly lost their influence on the direction and nature of student activism. Many Islamic Associations of Students, originally supported and even found-

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ed by these clerics, have taken on a life of their own, becoming real players in the current power struggle. One can witness a re-birth of dissident student movement – this time ironically among the very students hand-picked by the ruling clerics themselves, for example, the two leaders of the recent student uprising, Tabarzadi and Mohammadi.¹

Several factors have contributed to this re-birth of pro-democracy student activism. For one, Khatami's election in May 1997 in which the massive participation and supportive votes of the youth and women played a crucial role, was a result of the profound change in the political culture of Iran. Students' sense of victory about the surprising results of the presidential elections was a turning point in the recognition of the significance of their own political role. Moreover, a subsequent slow lift of the totalitarian hold on the cultural and intellectual domains of society gave rise to new currents of political and cultural expression among students.

During the past two years, a series of peaceful student rallies was held around political and non-political grievances relating to freedom of press, political prisoners, housing issues, and quality of food in dormitories. Such protests, however, have been quickly dispersed or crushed by the police and vigilantes (Ansar Hezbollah) that are still under the control of the ruling conservatives. Furthermore, Khatami's reform efforts have been sabotaged and interrupted by totalitarian Islamists through various means, including constant pressure on progressive press, intimidation, terror and the assassination of a number of prominent opposition leaders, writers and intellectuals.

Another turning point resulting in further erosion of legitimacy and sanctity of the clerical rule in the eyes of the students was the violent raid of student hostels by the police and plain-clothed security forces in July 1999. Instead of punishing the perpetrators of violence, hundreds of students were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. For instance, Ahmad Bateni, the student pictured on the cover of the *Economist* magazine (7-15-99), holding the bloody shirt of another fellow student, was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Voicing its outrage, the pro-reform *Khordad* daily wrote: 'Holding a bloody T-shirt is a crime, but making a T-shirt bloody is not a crime!'²

Demographic and social change

To better understand the significance of the prospective trends in student activism, it is necessary to account for certain structural and demographic transformations that have turned the Iranian society of the late 1990s into one very different from that inherited by Khomeini in 1979. Recent drastic demographic change, due in part to the pro-natal policy of the state and its reinforcement of motherhood as the primary role of women in the war-stricken years of 1980-1988, has shifted the character of the population in Iran, the size of which doubled between 1978 and 1996. Over 70% of

Iran's 65 million people are now below 25 years of age. It is no surprise that the majority of those arrested during the July crackdown on students were under 20.

Along with demographic changes, there have been both quantitative and qualitative changes in the student body. Except for a brief period of decline in the number of university students – from 140,000 before the revolution to 117,148 after the 'Cultural Revolution' (1982-83 academic year) – there was an annual growth rate of 13% for the 1980s and still a higher rate after the war with Iraq. Prior to Khatami's election there were 1,150,000 students in universities and higher education institutions.

Since the revolution, the ethnic, class, and gender composition of the student body in universities has also changed in important ways. After the 1979 Revolution, the number of rural and lower class students in state universities increased tremendously. The exodus of many upper and upper-middle class students to universities in foreign countries, purging of secular students, the admission policy based on moral and ideological standards and also admission quotas for war veteran family members, resulted in an increase in the proportion of students from traditional, poorer and provincial backgrounds in state universities. Ten years later, the gender composition of the students began to change dramatically. In 1999, for the first time in the history of Iranian higher education, the number of female students in universities surpassed that of male students by about 20,000 (4%).³ Regardless of their background, these students have now come to represent the aspirations and orientations of a new urban middle class, rather than those of the rural or the bazaar subcultures.

'The futureless future-makers'

The recent shift in the state's population policy toward family-planning and the successful decline in the fertility rate are too late to address the huge demands of the new generation of youth for education, jobs, and leisure. By the late 1990s, facing increasing unemployment, high inflation, and bleak economic outlook, many students lost hope in being able to secure a decent future. Student activists sarcastically ask the ruling clerics: 'Why are you calling us "future-makers" while you have left us with no future (*ayandeh-sazan-e bi-ayandeh*)?'

Since Khatami's presidency there has been a decrease in the intrusion by Islamist vigilantes into the private lives and personal choices of the youth and women, and the dress and behaviour codes have also been less strictly monitored. Yet, the sense of despair among many youngsters continues. The recent crackdown has further intensified insecurity, resentment, and above all the identity crisis among the youth.⁴ An alarming rate of depression among young girls in certain parts of Iran, like Qum, has been documented by official reports.⁵

The new student movement is still in flux, inexperienced and loosely organized. So far, students' demands for freedom of thought, of assembly, of press, and of political prison-

ers, as well as their demands for rule of law and security, have been raised in a voice of reason and in a non-violent manner. The predominant discourses among student activists are still very similar to those used by the new reform movement reflective of the 'new thinking' among Islamic liberal and leftist intellectuals as well as within secular nationalist trends. While one hopes for a peaceful and constructive evolutionary process of reform, there is a continuous and violent interruption in that process by the retrogressive forces. The lack of profound improvement in the legal system, civil and human rights, and economic conditions could result in a revolutionary explosion, especially among the increasingly restless and outraged youth. ◆

Notes

1. See, for an excellent analysis on the recent student movement, Ali Akbar Mahdi, 'The Students Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analyses*, 15, November 1999, p. 5-46.
2. Cited in the Tehran daily *Asr Azadegan*, November 15, 1999, p. 2.
3. See Mahdi, p. 14-15.
4. Saeed Madani, 'Shouresh-e Novo-Javanan' (Rebellion of the Youth), *Iran Farda*, 57, 17 Shahrivar 1378 (August 1999).
5. See, e.g., the report by Azam Kamgouyan, *Zanaan*, No. 57, Aban 1378/November 1999, p. 60.

Dr Nayereh Tohidi is assistant professor at California State University, Northridge, and research fellow at the UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies, USA.
E-mail: ntohidi@humnet.ucla.edu