

Iran under Ahmadinejad: populism and its malcontents

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Is it not passing brave to be a king,
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?
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In October 2007 President Putin of Russia paid a state visit to Iran. It was the first visit by a Russian leader since Stalin visited the country in 1943, during the period of the Allied occupation, and its significance was not lost on Iranian observers, particularly in the local media. President Ahmadinejad, for his part, always the showman, was keen to maximize the attendant publicity and to use the visit as a means of declaring to the world that Iran had definitively taken its place on the global stage. His predecessor may have visited a host of European countries, but it was he who had succeeded in inviting a senior world leader to Iran.

In practical terms, not a huge amount was achieved, and more sober analysts reflected on the disagreements that were being aired behind the scenes. But for Ahmadinejad it was the public performance that mattered; and, for a man known for his devout, if somewhat eccentric, religious views, the stage which he constructed for the joint press conference owed less to his presidential predecessors than it did to the monarch whom the Islamic Revolution had overthrown. Mohammad Reza Shah's imperial vanity had been encapsulated in the popular consciousness by the theatrical extravaganza he had convened in Persepolis in 1971 to commemorate the 2,500th year of the Iranian monarchy, with the intention of signalling that Iran, long humiliated at the hands of foreign powers, had finally 'arrived'. Since that time, official associations with Persepolis had been muted, and if visits increased—the association proved too tempting for successive presidents to avoid—it was nonetheless qualified with some Islamic injunction or moral tale. In this particular case, however, Ahmadinejad went considerably further. Putin did not visit Persepolis; Ahmadinejad brought Persepolis to him.

For a president more usually associated with Shi'i eschatology, this was a remarkable symbolic turn. In fact, no president since the inception of the Islamic Republic has been quite so explicit in his exploitation of such distinctly nationalist motifs. Ahmadinejad's choice reflects the eclectic and paradoxical nature of his power. Staunchly religious, yet vigorously nationalistic to the point of chauvinism, as president he has pursued populism and authoritarianism in almost

equal measure. He is lauded for his apparent popularity and his common touch with ordinary people, yet his presidency has nevertheless evinced some of the most repressive tendencies of any since 1979. His thirst for popular acclamation and determination to represent the 'common man' are matched by an almost equal distrust of that man's vote at the ballot box. Such characteristics are, of course, not necessarily mutually exclusive; indeed, they could be considered the hallmarks of authoritarian populism the world over. Yet it is the sheer excess of Ahmadinejad that distinguishes his presidency and casts its inherent contradictions into sharp relief. It is this very excess which exposes the fragility of a charismatic authority constructed with a view to reconciling the many contradictions of the Islamic Republic. Awareness of this fragility and the paranoia it engenders lead to further excess in pursuit of the promise of a utopian future, itself demanded by a public yearning for an escape from the trials of the present. The uses and abuses of charismatic authority enjoy a long pedigree in Iranian history. Intoxicating for the beholder and reassuring to those in need, it nonetheless remains, as Weber noted, an inherently unstable form of political organization.

Ideology and utopianism have been twin staples of Iranian political life. Successive crises and instability, at least since the eighteenth century, have generated demands for a saviour to restore order, stability and a measure of justice. It has normally been the failure to deliver on the last of these which has resulted in repeated cycles of charismatic leadership, real or imagined, genuine or constructed. Religion, and society's receptiveness to it, have played a pivotal role in this development and have frequently resulted in a political movement's acquiring millenarian flourishes. But it would be erroneous to suggest that charismatic leadership has been wholly religious in its Iranian manifestations. Indeed, it is important to remember that in Iran the narrative of the saviour enjoys a strong nationalistic pedigree and at times has been set against religious orthodoxy to the extent that it has acquired anti-religious overtones. Such movements are, of course, rare, and even the most cynical leader will often pay lip service to religious norms, recognizing at the very least the importance of popular superstitions for the retention of power.¹

In the twentieth century, Reza Shah (r. 1925–41) was very much portrayed as the saviour of his country and presented by the intelligentsia that initially promoted him as an authentic Iranian hero framed within not only a monarchical tradition, but a Zoroastrian one.² Such imagery, too often dismissed by those prone to see everything in Iran through the prism of Shi'i Islam, retains a powerful influence on the Iranian world view, especially among intellectuals. This nationalist myth is strongly reinforced and embellished by Shi'i motifs which add further elements of martyrdom and tragedy to the narrative, as symbolized by the death of Imam Hussein at Kerbala. Significantly, this narrative of material failure and spiritual success was transformed by thinkers such as Ali Shariati, who interpreted the

¹ Even staunchly religious millenarian movements are often characterized by their strongly anti-clerical stance: see N. Cohn, *The pursuit of the millennium* (London: Pimlico, 2004).

² See e.g. S. R. Shafaq, 'Patriotic poetry in modern Iran', *Middle East Journal* 6: 4, 1952, p. 428.

martyrdom of Hussein in radically revolutionary terms as not simply a tragedy to be mourned until the return of the Hidden Imam but a catastrophe to be avenged by all as participants in the struggle. Shariati's views were echoed by others, but his particular importance lay in reaching an emerging middle-class constituency. The heady mix of Marxian revolutionary thought and Islam completely derailed the attempts of Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–79) to construct a charismatic authority of his own, even though he resurrected religious motifs which had largely been discarded by his father. Indeed, it is often forgotten that Mohammad Reza Shah framed his concept of divine right monarchy not only within Iranian monarchical tradition but within Shi'i Islam, and that—attracting much ridicule from his detractors—he was apt to expound publicly on his personal religious experiences. In the event, this synthesis was to be appropriated, developed and fully articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolutionaries.

History reminds us that the construction of charismatic authority, along with its religious associations, was a feature of Iranian society long before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The myth of the saviour is a recurrent motif which enjoys both a religious and a nationalist constituency (by and large not distinct); moreover, perhaps most strikingly for the members of the current elite, the collapse of the shah's regime bears witness to both the fragility of such authority and the fickleness of the Iranian public. Indeed, for all the certainty in the divine providence of the Islamic Revolution, there is an equal fear of the loss of that particular mandate, an outcome over which, by its very nature, men have little influence.³ Certainty and fatalism, those hallmarks of Iranian government through the ages, can therefore be regarded as two sides of the same coin. In a similar vein, another important lesson learned by the revolutionaries was that it was in large part the shah's crisis of confidence, and the consequent fatalism, that lost him the support of the masses and hence his throne. Where the shah failed, Ayatollah Khomeini succeeded, showing a stubborn determination and the courage of his convictions in seeing through the logic of the revolution which had emerged. In this sense one can say that there is a reciprocal and dialectical relationship between action and ideals, to the extent that some will argue that power provides its own justification.⁴

Unsurprisingly, interpretations of the nature of Khomeini's charismatic authority vary greatly, even among his supporters; and Khomeini himself was shrewd enough to let a degree of ambiguity prevail over the precise nature of his religious charisma. His more devout supporters were in no doubt of his particular religious charisma, the millenarian qualities of the revolution itself and Khomeini's connection with the divine. Indeed, what is most striking about the creation and development of this charisma is how many otherwise secular individuals promoted it as a tactical means to the strategic end of overthrowing the shah. This somewhat cynical manipulation of the superstitions of the people was justified on the grounds that the ends justified the means, though it would be erroneous to suggest that

³ In traditional Iranian historiography this is conceptualized within the concept of divine grace, *khavarneh* (*farr-izadi*), which is never permanent but is very much tied to the actions of the ruler.

⁴ It is this dialectical relationship which allows for the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of abstract idealism and ruthless pragmatism.

cynicism was the only motive. It is quite clear that some genuinely believed, and that the propensity for belief is greater in societies undergoing traumatic change. At the same time, it should be stressed that Ayatollah Khomeini, for all the adulation that accrued to him, was careful to delineate the ultimate boundaries of his charisma. He might not have denied some of the claims made about him, but he was also careful not to make or reinforce those claims himself. What his charisma undoubtedly achieved, however, was the provision of certainty, reassurance and an ideological cement to bind the disparate forces of the revolution together at a time when the country was in danger of tearing itself apart. His role and effectiveness may be debated, but most accept that he guided the country through the turbulence of revolution and war. That he died soon after the end of the war meant that, at least for some devotees, his charismatic leadership would be forever associated with revolution, war and struggle. It would in time prove to be a problematic identification.

The routinization of charisma

In the aftermath of the war and the absence of Khomeini's charismatic authority, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Islamic Republic's first executive president (the office of prime minister having been removed through constitutional amendment in 1989), sought to stabilize the revolutionary system through what has been generically called the normalization of politics. In practical terms this involved a strengthening of the office of the president, with greater centralization, an alliance with mercantile interests—which Rafsanjani, with a mercantile background of his own, was able to achieve with relative ease—and a careful management of 'charisma', with the appointment of his younger colleague, Ali Khamenei, to the position of Supreme Leader and *vali-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist). Considered a religious and intellectual lightweight by many of his peers, Khamenei's position was bolstered by a further constitutional amendment which defined his position as 'absolute'. This amendment would later come to haunt Rafsanjani and his successors, but at the time it was seen as an essential support for a Leader who clearly lacked charismatic authority among the religious elite. Nevertheless, for all his weakness, Khamenei and the office he held represented the link with Khomeini, and there was a clear function for him to perform in keeping the revolutionary purists and zealots in check. Rafsanjani, the great political manipulator, could then be left to design and manage the new state system, calling on Khamenei as and when some measure of religious sanction was required. Khamenei therefore represented the charismatic repository of the system, contained.

All this might have worked to everyone's satisfaction had the Rafsanjani settlement worked. But not only did Rafsanjani succeed in antagonizing two conflicting wings of the revolutionary movement, he also singularly failed in the one area on which he was supposed to be expert: the economy. The crisis in the economy which emerged from an over-reliance on mercantile interests and methods resulted not only in inflation but also in greater, rather than reduced, disparities in wealth.

This widening gap between rich and poor was used by both right and left wings of the political spectrum to attack Rafsanjani. The right, or 'conservatives', as they were increasingly called, sought to focus their opposition to Rafsanjani by rallying round the figure of Khamenei and encouraging him to take a more interventionist role. As Khamenei succumbed to the temptation of repeated flattery, the danger of an 'absolute' *vali-e faqih* became increasingly apparent. In these circumstances, Rafsanjani decided that the stability of the state would be better served by his aligning himself with the left, whose overtly republican political platform was at least more familiar, and appeared to be more manageable. These political manoeuvres in many ways reflected personal rivalries but they did also reflect different approaches to politics. Although it was not publicly and explicitly articulated, there was a clear sense that a move towards authoritarianism and the reconstruction of charisma was inherently destabilizing. For revolutionary purists, charismatic succession and the continuous revolution were the sine qua non of this Shi'i movement, for which the overthrow of the shah was simply a passing moment. Moreover, as if to reinforce this perception, continued economic difficulties made for a public in search of attentive leadership. But before Khamenei could settle into his stride and perform this role, Rafsanjani had one final surprise.

The election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 was not only a surprise to the conservative political establishment, it also proved a remarkable obstacle to their reinvention of charismatic authority around the person of Ayatollah Khamenei. With the benefit of hindsight, and the disappointment which gradually accrued around his presidency, it is often difficult to remember just how popular Khatami was when he was first elected in 1997. Furthermore, since discussion of his presidency has revolved around the issues of democracy and dialogue, other aspects of his leadership and the role he performed have been neglected. A common critical refrain has been that Khatami's intellectualism went over the heads of his constituents and that this in part explains his gradual alienation from the public, who were clearly less interested in ideas of democracy than their erudite president. This assessment, however, neglects the salient point that, for all his flaws, Khatami proved a remarkably consistent election winner, and if students proved increasingly critical, the mass of Iranians remained resolutely loyal. This says more about the Iranian public than it does about the qualities of Khatami's leadership, but it does reflect an acute reality which was not lost on Khatami's rivals. Indeed, it is worth bearing in mind that when Khatami was effectively plucked out of obscurity to contest the 1997 election, one of his campaign managers, Ataollah Mohajerani (later to become minister of culture) noted that his being a 'Seyyed' (lineal descendant of the Prophet Mohammad) would undoubtedly assist in broadening his appeal.⁵ This was a clear acknowledgement that for many people the clear difference between Khatami and his rival Nateq Nuri was that one could lay claim to some sort of charismatic descent, the other could not. (Similarly, while Rafsanjani was not a Seyyed, Khamenei, like Khomeini before him, was.) The impact of this factor should not be exaggerated; nevertheless,

⁵ BBC SWB ME/2875 MED/22, 24 March 1997; *Akhbar*, 18 March 1997.

it was a sufficiently important characteristic to have featured in the reformist electoral strategy.

Khatami, of course, was uneasy with the role created for him. He had no intention of being the people's hero and bore the responsibility with barely disguised discomfort. His intellectualism and rationality argued against the need for heroes, and one of his constant refrains was to admonish the public for a yearning which he was ill suited to fulfil, and, more importantly, which he considered politically dangerous. Hero-worship was a disease which resulted in demagoguery, populism and political conceit. History showed that, in the Iranian context, sycophancy and flattery could lead to conceit of extraordinarily destructive proportions. Iranians should not seek heroes, argued Khatami; each and every one of them could and should be a hero. This was an intellectually sound and thoroughly modern position to take. In a modern democratic state, people should take individual responsibility. But this role of passivity was taken to such extremes that Khatami effectively emasculated himself. Such was his unwillingness to lead that even highly sympathetic supporters wondered why he had taken the job in the first place. Even his ideological bedfellows, who agreed with his rationalization, argued that he had underestimated the needs of the Iranian population.

Where Khatami feared to tread, however, others were more than willing to step in. Two singular developments occurred during his presidency; a third was ultimately to result in his political eclipse. In the first place a vigorous contest took place to redefine Khomeini's role within the revolution and its aftermath. As noted above, while Khomeini retained a certain ambiguity about his role, he was likewise careful not to overstep the boundaries of religious decency as far as claims about his own person were concerned. One trend which he constantly resisted, for example, was the desire of his acolytes to idolize his image. Photographs—the standard political icon of loyalty in Iran—were of course pervasive, but the aggressive sacralization of his image had to wait until after his death. During Rafsanjani's presidency there had been some debate as to how far this process should go. Rafsanjani and, later, Khatami wanted to present a more human side to the Leader of the Revolution, presenting him as a man of the people carrying on with day-to-day tasks, such as making a cup of tea at home. Such images were no less iconic and were not intended to debase the legacy of Khomeini, but they represented an attempt at secularizing his charisma. Others, however, were determined to sacralize the charisma, and consequently images were presented of Khomeini's face shining forth from the sky, emanating from the sun as if surrounded by a halo. Perhaps the only concession to the humanizers was that Khomeini's face would be smiling benignly. Be that as it may, such presentations remained highly controversial, as indicated by the frequency with which such billboard images changed. Similar debates took place over whether Khomeini's image should adorn banknotes, with some arguing that such a development was sacrilegious—not to Islam but to Khomeini, whose image might find itself in all sorts of compromising circumstances. It is worth remembering that no such notes emerged during Khomeini's lifetime, and he is reputed to have been against any

such a development, holding firm to the Islamic sanction against the use of graven images. This was a view promoted by the reformists, including Khatami, many of whom had much closer family and personal ties to the Khomeini clan than any of the conservative eulogizers. This proved a highly inconvenient truth. But the truth could not be allowed to get in the way of political expediency.

As the challenge to the Rafsanjani-Khatami vision of the future of the Islamic Republic gathered pace,⁶ it was increasingly clear that the sacralization of Khomeini and the institutionalization of his charismatic authority were essential not only to the resistance to that vision, but to Khamenei's position as the successor. Charismatic succession could be secured and prolonged only if Khomeini's role was itself defined and historically secure. Thus, at the very time when Khatami was seeking the desacralization of the state and a concentration of power within the republican organs of government, his ideological enemies were countering with a process of sacralization through the office of the Leader, which was expanded dramatically in this period. Indeed, while many of these processes had their roots during the Rafsanjani presidency, they received their greatest extension during the presidency of his successor, Mohammad Khatami, very much against the latter's wishes but aided by the widespread fear among conservatives—including, ironically, Rafsanjani (a target for attack from all sides)—over the ultimate logic of the reform movement and the threat this represented to their (financial) interests. Arguably, at the very time when the Iranian state was in the process of 'revolutionizing' itself, the elites turned to the myths of the past. Khamenei was the single most important beneficiary of this process, and, as noted above, he proved highly susceptible to its charms. If Khomeini had been something of a 'free floating' (religious) intellectual, sagely bestowing his wisdom upon a grateful *umma* with an authority which extended far beyond traditional national boundaries, Khamenei was increasingly urged to focus his efforts on the enemy within. Indeed, if Khamenei's religious authority was initially directed towards Muslims abroad—so as to avoid any embarrassing confrontations with the remaining Grand Ayatollahs then residing in the holy city of Qom—his political power, in an effort to confront the reform movement, was reinforced and redirected internally.

The reinvention of charisma

In order to achieve this, the Office of the Leader—previously little more than an immediate household—expanded into a fully fledged bureaucracy with representatives dispersed throughout government. This bureaucratic network was itself complemented by similar structures in the conservative-dominated judiciary, the Guardian Council (whose functions similarly expanded) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In many ways, the traditional government headed by the president paled in comparison with this bureaucratic behemoth, ostensibly entirely loyal to the charismatic personality of the Supreme Leader. This was, of

⁶ This vision was increasingly defined and criticized as 'secular', a term which has long lost its sting in Iranian political discourse, having now been replaced by 'laicization', which is understood as irreligiosity.

course, an exercise in vanity. The organization was bureaucratic and in practice oligarchic rather than autocratic, but for the purposes of popular consumption the myth of charismatic autocracy had to be encouraged. Consequently, Khamenei accumulated titles—some being tested and quietly discarded if the audience proved unreceptive—while ritual and deference returned with a vengeance. Most obvious in this regard was Khamenei's growing predilection for the kissing of his hand, a ritual previously associated with the shah. Khomeini, to be sure, had also had his hand kissed, but this was often excused on the grounds of his exceptional status. Moreover, it was argued that he did not so much demand such ingratiations as accept it when offered by a grateful public. With respect to Khamenei the reverse appeared to be the case, and certainly neither Rafsanjani nor Khatami, nor their respective cabinets, was inclined to this symbolic act of submission. Indeed, unsurprisingly, the generation which grew up with Khamenei were less willing to participate in the act of adulation, and Khamenei (equally unsurprisingly) tended to focus his energies on the young and devout. As far as the educated urban elites were concerned, these had by and large been lost to Khatami, as was dramatically indicated by the student riots in 1999, when Khamenei was openly parodied by the demonstrations.

Consequently Khamenei focused his energies on the provinces, drawing a distinction between the revolutionary purists of the countryside and the effete urban elites, who were characterized as distant, alien and parasitical. Although reformists, as successive electoral victories had shown, enjoyed a broad constituent base, their increasing identification with rich 'north Tehranis', incongruous as this might be in reality, eventually took its toll. Khamenei, meanwhile, went on a succession of provincial tours which were generously amplified on state television, then run by Ali Larijani, which, in a series of poorly edited newscasts, showed the Ayatollah being mobbed by grateful crowds. Relentless repetition of such scenes, often within one newscast, drew ridicule from keener observers of the news media; but, working on the premise that people believe what they see, the intention was clearly to impress upon the public at large that this man was popular. There were certainly no sudden breaks in transmission when Khamenei was addressing a crowd. More controversially, state television also produced a public information film which sought to interpose the events of 1979 with the rise of Islam, drawing barely disguised parallels between Khomeini and the Prophet Mohammad and, perhaps more strikingly, between Imam Ali and Khamenei, whose first name was Ali, and who was now being introduced as 'the Ali of the age'. This was an astounding claim to make, and would not in all likelihood have been even ventured had not the deaths of a number of Grand Ayatollahs during the 1990s facilitated its promotion.⁷ In 1989, when Khamenei had been appointed *vali-e faqih*, he was not even considered *primus inter pares*. Now, through the accidental coincidence of death, patronage and repression, he was asserting both his political and his religious authority.

⁷ The significance of this association lies in the particular role Imam Ali plays within Shi'i theology. See in this regard Franz Rosenthal, quoted in D. Menashri, *Education and the making of modern Iran* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 15.

The power vacuum within the religious hierarchy, exacerbated by the fact that the remaining Grand Ayatollahs were in Iraq and/or (voluntarily or otherwise) 'quietist' by political disposition, enabled a redefined millenarian narrative to re-emerge without the criticisms and condemnations which would usually accompany such a development.⁸ Ayatollah Khomeini's charismatic authority proved sufficient to endure containment; Khamenei's constructed charisma was more dependent on the encouragement of such ideas. Without the educational background and respect of his predecessor, Khamenei relied far more on the esoteric qualities of his authority. The danger of such an approach was, and continues to be, that he may lack the capacity to contain and control these concepts and the utopian expectations they engender among the general population. These problems, of course, lay in the future. The immediate concern for Khamenei and his increasingly hard-line supporters was to defeat Khatami, not only politically but ideologically. One must not doubt the very real convictions which underpinned the introduction of these ideas among some sections of the population. But it would be naive to believe that conviction alone drove this process. Political motives, and the exploitation of common religious belief, also played a crucial role in determining their development. The reform movement was no longer simply a political movement; it was a heresy which had to be eradicated. It was not simply that 'Islam was in danger'; Khatami and the movement he represented constituted the greatest danger to Islam and religion since the time of Adam!⁹ This was eschatological politics at its best, and Khatami grew increasingly exasperated.¹⁰

Another problem, however, now reared its head. Even Khatami's staunchest critics were critical of his methods rather than his ideas; moreover, among those who preferred their politics simple he remained a 'Seyyed', and a smiling one at that. Others who grew disillusioned with Khatami withdrew from political life altogether. If they regarded him as tragic, they viewed the farcical antics of the hard-liners with disdain. Perhaps most galling for Khamenei and his supporters was the fact that despite (or perhaps because of) all the attacks on Khatami and his palpable weaknesses as a leader, he remained popular. He could, in short, still draw a crowd, and remained by all accounts an election winner. He enjoyed a legitimacy among key sectors of the population for whom religious charismatic authority of the type espoused by Khamenei was an anachronism. Consequently, a new strategy had to be developed.

Enter Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi. Misbah-Yazdi was a hard-line conservative with a thoroughly autocratic pedigree. He had operated on the fringes of political life for much of the 1990s, periodically voicing concerns about various aspects of social corruption—a theme he warmed to during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. During the 1990s and especially during the Khatami administration his views were widely regarded as so extreme as to be largely irrelevant to the direction in which

⁸ See in this regard Ze'ev Maghen, 'Occultation in perpetuum: Shi'ite Messianism and the policies of the Islamic Republic', *Middle East Journal* 62: 2, Spring 2008, pp. 232–57.

⁹ See *Nowruz*, 19 Khordad 1381 / 9 June 2002, p. 7.

¹⁰ President Khatami himself threatened to resign in May 2002: see *Nowruz*, 16 Ordibehesht 1381 / 6 May 2002, p. 1; *Nowruz*, 24 Ordibehesht 1381 / 14 May 2002, p. 11.

the country was going. At best he was a useful reminder of how bad things could, at the very outside, become. People viewed the prospects of his achieving power much as Europeans might view government under the many right-wing nationalist parties which dot the political landscape. But for all his extreme political views, Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi was also recognized as among the most intellectual of the new clerical elite, with a growing network of well-placed and influential students. Most striking, perhaps, was the fact that Misbah-Yazdi was among the most prominent of the Qom-based Ayatollahs to initiate a proactive programme of intellectual engagement (with the aim of better understanding the enemy) with the West and its ideas, by sponsoring his students to study at western universities. This facility itself garnered him more loyal and grateful disciples. It was this intellect which brought him to the attention of the Leader's office and ensured that he was entrusted with the task not only of deconstructing reform but of replacing it with something new.

Misbah-Yazdi was an instinctive elitist. Disdainful of democratic pretensions, he regarded the republican provisions of the constitution as a burden to be discarded as soon as it became politically prudent to do so. For him, the revolution of 1979 was resolutely Islamic, and any popularization of it could result only in the dilution of core values, which by extension could only be protected, nourished and extended by an elite. This religious/intellectual vanguard, represented by the Supreme Leader, was the 'elect', entrusted with a sacred duty. The notion of 'Iran for all Iranians'—a slogan pioneered by the reformists—and any sort of political participation were anathema to Misbah-Yazdi's thinking. The masses existed to acclaim and approve. Authority had not been delegated by God to the people; it remained with the Hidden Imam and his chosen devotees, who in this case conveniently coincided with Misbah-Yazdi and his ideological bedfellows in the Office of the Supreme Leader. The autocratic elitist philosophy espoused and developed by Misbah-Yazdi had nevertheless to adapt itself to the realities of the day, and the important question of power. Whether the hard-line conservatives liked it or not, Khatami's presidency had created new terms of reference, and the articulation of charismatic authority would have to be channelled through somewhat orthodox routes. These methodological compromises, however, would be counterbalanced by a complementary strategy which sought to prepare the public for a charismatic revival. In sum, one strand of the strategy was to work through the existing political structures, in order to avoid the seizure of power being seen by the educated middle classes as nothing less than a coup; at the same time, measures would be taken to soften the Iranian public to the inevitability and need for such a charismatic moment. These strategies are not mutually exclusive—even the staunchest secularist may have occasion to argue that the time for dictatorship has arrived—and it is these very synergies within the Iranian ideological landscape which make the myth of the saviour so potent. But they are distinguished here in order to emphasize the fact that a deliberate strategy was adopted to create the environment necessary for the social acceptance of charismatic authority, and that this environment was to be

structured in such a way that it would generate 'a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm'.¹¹

The first task was to create distress. The religious hyperbole alluded to above was one aspect of this strategy, and while Khatami was able to dismiss the more hysterical claims about the threat which 'reform' posed, the articulation of such views must have helped to reinforce prejudices which existed among core 'devotees'. On a more practical level, it allowed such devotees to dedicate themselves to the derailment of the reform process in the conviction that the end—salvation—justified any and all means. The means proved varied and imaginative, ranging from the systematic blocking of legislation to the vetting of candidates at elections, arbitrary arrest and, last but by no means least, murder. The most celebrated example of this last element was the sequence of chain murders political activists uncovered in 1998, and the subsequent assassination attempt on the chief strategist of the reform movement, Saeed Hajarian, in March 2000.¹² Although these hit the headlines—largely because of the political repercussions—they were but the tip of a far more sordid iceberg. Indeed, far from such violence subsiding, it seemed to increase: Iran suddenly found itself witnessing a spate of serial murders, principally in Tehran, Mashhad and Kerman. All three cases involved, in the broadest terms, individuals who had apparently 'sinned'. In the Tehran and Mashhad cases the victims were by and large identified as prostitutes.¹³ In the Kerman case the definition was somewhat broader and considerably more arbitrary, though it is only in this case that a connection has been made to Misbah-Yazdi. While these murders were not political in the sense that the victims were not political figures, they were political events and their social impact was profound.

Indeed, what was most interesting was the public reaction to these events. The first of these outrages, the murders in Tehran, had occurred relatively early in the Khatami administration. The murderer was caught, publicly condemned as depraved, convicted, and executed to much fanfare in a bid to placate the victims' families, who had protested at the apparent slowness of the police investigation. The murders in Mashhad were no less outrageous, but in this case the public response was at times curiously ambiguous. Although widely condemned and executed, the murderer claimed that his motives had been pure. As a war veteran, he argued, he had fought to see an Islamic state in Iran but instead had found social corruption in the form of prostitution, which he felt it his religious duty to eradicate. It was quite clear to observers that here was a war veteran with serious psychological, social and, needless to say, economic problems who had grown bitter at the blatant disparities in wealth he discovered on his return from the front and at the vulgar materialism which had permeated society. Prostitutes were in his eyes the pinnacle of this perversion of Islamic morals. There can be little doubt that this case reflected

¹¹ Max Weber, *On charisma and institution building: selected papers*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 23.

¹² Arguably the greatest personal impact of this was on Khatami himself: see *Akhbar-e Eqtasad*, 24 Esfand 1378 / 14 March 2000, p. 1.

¹³ For conservative reaction to the Mashhad murders, see M. Hajizadeh, *Aqazadeh-ha* (Aghazadeh-ha) (Tehran: Jameh Daran, 1381 / 2002), pp. 125–32.

a serious malaise in Iranian society, and the violence was associated with poverty and born of the iniquities of a dysfunctional political and social system. But rather than expose and address this problem, as reformists were inclined to do, the administration's opponents argued that such moral corruption was a direct consequence of the laxity introduced by the reformists, and that the murderer should be neither condemned nor regarded as a victim of circumstance, but hailed as a hero. In fact, his family went on the record to support his actions, and his young son even boasted that he too would one day like to emulate his father's achievements. Indeed, for all the public condemnation of the killings, there was by all accounts considerable sympathy for the man in his own locality. The Kerman murders, committed in 2002, took this whole process a significant stage further. The killings in this case were quite arbitrary and committed on the basis of suspicion only. There was very little public interest, even though the legal consequences of the case were to be more dramatic than in either of the other two instances.

Although the men, members of the local *basij* (Militia), were convicted by the court in Kerman, an appeal to the higher court in Tehran saw these convictions overturned. A series of exchanges occurred between the courts in Kerman and Tehran until, in an extraordinary judgment of April 2007, the court in Tehran exonerated the murderers, arguing that the burden of proof lay with the (deceased) victims. In other words, if the motives of the assailants, in wanting to rid the world of sin, had been genuine, then it was up to the victims to prove that they had in fact been innocent. This remarkable judgment caused unsurprising consternation among the legal community and effectively opened the door to self-appointed religious vigilantes throughout the country.¹⁴ The political and social implications of this judgment were profound; thankfully, wiser counsels were to prevail, with the case being reopened and reassessed by the Supreme Court, although it says something of the state of public apathy that the case has not received widespread publicity and it remains unclear just what the legal state of play is.

Legal issues aside, the change in the public's reaction from the initial revelations of the chain murders in 1998, through the subsequent serial murders in Tehran, to the killings in Mashhad and then Kerman, has been remarkable. While zealots sought to justify the murders, many ordinary Iranians became resigned to them. Moreover, resignation turned to fear and impotence over the extent of the social malaise which clearly called for some firm action. The fatalism so feared by the reformists had returned with a vengeance: 'civil society' had been muted; people had not only been turned off politics, they had been disempowered. The culture of deference, so prevalent under the shah, had been reinvigorated; and perhaps the most (tragically) ironic aspect of this development has been the fact that, having created the problem, hard-liners positioned themselves as the only people who could solve it. They were, after all, the only people with the 'courage' to repress and execute people, a trend which resulted in a campaign against 'thugs and hooligans', with summary executions meted out in public. Ayatollah Jannati

¹⁴ Nehmat Ahmadi, 'Negahi beh parvande-ye ghatl-haye mahfeli-e kerman az aghaz ta konoon' (A look at the file of Kerman serial murders from the beginning to the present), *Etemad*, 29 Farvardon 1386 / 18 April 2007.

went so far as to congratulate the security forces, providing encouragement with the religious reassurance that Imam Ali would have executed far more.¹⁵

The public, as it happened, were not impressed. Although there appeared to be few public protests at these developments, there was sufficient disquiet that the judiciary eventually moved to curtail public executions.¹⁶ It was a small concession to public sensibilities, but perhaps also a reminder that social limits existed. The boundaries had, to be sure, shifted considerably since 2000, but the emasculation of the public was by no means complete, and the extent and nature of the distress is difficult to gauge. Iranians have tended to justify autocracy on the grounds that Iranian society, inured to centuries if not millennia of despotism, is simply not ready for any sort of political participation and far prefers to defer responsibility to the autocrat. Such caricatures undoubtedly harbour elements of truth, but rarely convey the whole picture. As one historian has noted, few peoples have been quite so revolutionary or rebellious as the Iranians in the twentieth century, and there can be little doubt that political consciousness has grown and developed exponentially as technology has facilitated the dissemination of ideas.¹⁷ Successive governments have sought to suppress this growing political consciousness, or at the very least control it; but arguably it was given a huge boost by the revolution. Indeed, the myth of the popular revolution remains a powerful motif for the Islamic Republic, and while authoritarians have sought to define and tame it, they cannot wholly disavow it. Some of the resulting persistent tension was well encapsulated by the official reaction to the unveiling in Isfahan in 2002 of a statue to the Iranian mythical hero and insurrectionist Kaveh the Blacksmith. Ayatollah Jannati was swift to condemn the move, arguing that Kaveh was a 'counterrevolutionary'; the nationalist, anti-Arab and, by association, anti-Islamic symbolism cannot have been lost on him. The citizens of Isfahan simply retorted that Kaveh was the original revolutionary.¹⁸ Ideas of political participation and nationalism were, then, never far from the surface, and in Khatami's presidency they had been given a considerable boost. Indeed, the political energy of that initial period has now subsided to such an extent that it is difficult at times to remember just how potent a social force it had become. Khatami came to symbolize not only a new generation but also a populace with a more sceptical and questioning attitude, born of the tragic experience of war. In order to create enthusiasm, it was quite clear that both these key constituencies would have to be captured. Enter Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

¹⁵ See Ayatollah Jannati, Friday prayer sermon, 27 July 2007, BBC Monitoring Online; 'Iran to execute twenty thugs', IRTV1, 10 July 2007, BBC Monitoring Online; 'Iran senior judicial official urges speedy sentencing in security-related cases', IRTV1, 18 Aug. 2007, BBC Monitoring Online.

¹⁶ 'Iran judicial chief must now approve all public executions', AFP, 30 Jan. 2008.

¹⁷ N. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim world* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 60.

¹⁸ *Aftab-e Yazd*, 7 Shahrivar 1381 / 29 Aug. 2002, p. 5. The bronze statue weighed 5 tonnes and is effectively indestructible: IRNA, 25 Aug. 2002, BBC SWB Mon ME1 MEPol. The debate over Kaveh Ahangar and his role in the Iranian national myth is a sensitive one and was reignited in 1990 by Ahmad Shamlou, who argued that Kaveh, far from being a national liberator from Arab tyranny, was in fact an elitist who sought to restore monarchic absolutism. Jannati described Kaveh as the 'symbol of counterrevolutionaries'. The relevance of such a debate for the current situation in Iran is interesting. Shamlou has since been roundly condemned for this piece of revisionism by a succession of other writers. See e.g. H. Hosseinzadeh, *Zahak: az ostoreh ta vaghiat* (Zahak: from myth to reality) (Tehran: Tarfand, 1384 / 2005, pp. 196–213).

The emergence of Ahmadinejad was both a consequence and a product of the Khatami era. He was to be the popularizer of an otherwise rigidly elitist movement; the individual who would draw the crowds away from Khatami. Not only would he complement Khamenei, who had not been able to challenge Khatami effectively in this regard, but, importantly, he would also serve to shield him. If Ahmadinejad ever got out of control, as a man with known eclectic views might do, it would be a relatively easy process to set him aside. Given his loyalty to the office of the Leader and his religious views, he might even step aside willingly, having completed his task of rooting out the populist bases of reformism. In many ways, Ahmadinejad served the function of a charismatic vanguard, clearing the way of reformist debris.¹⁹

Of course, all this would depend on how well he was managed and how dependent his relationships were with the leadership and Misbah-Yazdi, who was often thought to harbour his own leadership ambitions. Suffice to say that, in Iran as elsewhere, the path of political ambition never runs smooth, and these relationships, especially where charisma is concerned, are by their very nature inherently unstable. Ahmadinejad was known as a character who was self-confident, utterly convinced and somewhat self-obsessed, especially with the return of the Hidden Imam. Quite what his perceived relationship with the Hidden Imam was remained initially unclear, but he appeared by all accounts to share the conviction of the Supreme Leader and his entourage, including an unshakeable belief in the apparent perfection of the Islamic Republic. The notion of 'reform' was to him incomprehensible. More important for his political masters than his religious views was his common touch, his accessibility to young people and his connections with the military. He had served in the war against Iraq (although his record has reportedly been embellished), had occupied some administrative posts—not with distinction, as has subsequently been put about—and had latterly devoted himself to being a teacher of *basij*. Perhaps even more important than all these was the fact that he seemed to possess an infectious optimism that was so incredible it was believed. He clearly enjoyed performing for the public, who in turned warmed to him, if not out of belief, then out of sympathy for his unashamed gall. In Iranian terms, he had an excess of spirit (*pur-ruhi*), which he expressed in an eclectic mix of conviction and nationalist bombast; he was by all accounts a fresh face and, significantly, he was not a cleric. He was, in short, just the enthusiastic tonic Iranian distress required.

And he played the role with some energy. With oil prices at unprecedentedly high levels, Ahmadinejad effectively declared that the bad times were over, the good times were here and utopia was within reach. The new president indulged in spending a glut of oil money in a spree which proved intoxicating and irresistible.²⁰ Eschewing the need for rational economic planning, Ahmadinejad pursued policy

¹⁹ In an interesting analogy, one Iranian noted that Khamenei had used Ahmadinejad to launch his own 'White Revolution': see 'Readers' comments', BBC Persian.com, 25 June 2005, accessed 30 June 2008.

²⁰ See in this regard the comments by a government spokesman when asked where all the oil revenue had gone: 'Dashtem va kharj kardeem' (We had it and spent it), *Baztab*, 10 Tir 1386 / 1 July 2007; for a thorough critique of government economic policy and its incoherence, see 'The second warning of economists to the administration: the full text of the letter of 57 experts and university professors to [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad', *Etemad*, 12 June 2007, BBC Monitoring Online.

by decree, announcing interest rate cuts, amalgamating departments and distributing largess.²¹ Going on a series of highly publicized provincial tours—DVDs were later produced for sale to those who missed them in person—Ahmadinejad not only distributed money to the needy but listened attentively to popular grievances, some of which were more surreal than others.²² The practicalities were of little concern; it was the performance that mattered. In one particular flourish which caused consternation in administrative circles, the president summarily redrew district boundaries in order to satisfy the yearning of one particular village to be in another administrative sector. One commentator criticized Ahmadinejad for the exercise of a royal prerogative which would have put the last shah to shame.²³ He was not the only person to draw royal comparisons, some of which were considerably less flattering than that with Mohammad Reza Shah and drew attention to Ahmadinejad's complacent attitude to mounting international tensions.²⁴ During the crisis concerning the seizure of British sailors in March 2007, acute observers were less concerned with the manner of their theatrical send-off than with the interesting detail that Ahmadinejad had apparently 'pardoned' their indiscretions. Of perhaps more concern were his religious views, first aired during an apparently private meeting with an Ayatollah in which Ahmadinejad was filmed (most likely on a camera phone) barely hiding his excitement at his first speech to the UN General Assembly, where he claimed he had been cloaked in a green aura—presumably by the Hidden Imam. This indiscretion, which was disseminated through the internet (and, it was suggested, his own office), engendered such ridicule that Ahmadinejad later denied it.

Yet for all the contempt it accrued, the incident revealed a deep insecurity which sought reassurance in the knowledge that the Hidden Imam was there, and supportive. Doubt had been emphatically replaced by faith, and this faith had given power beyond certainty. For those within this loop, things could only get better—Ahmadinejad has been described by one staunch supporter as the miracle of the third millennium.²⁵ For the vast majority of Iranians located outside and excluded from the inner circle, such statements were greeted as a mixture of tragedy and farce. Probably the apogee of this process came in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's visit to Columbia University in 2007. His supporters triumphantly announced that the president had won the 'metaphysical' struggle and secured a victory for Iranian nationalism which was more significant than the capture of the Fao peninsula in 1986 during the Iran–Iraq War.²⁶ This proved too much even for

²¹ As Weber notes, 'In general, charisma rejects all rational economic conduct': *On charisma*, p. 21.

²² See *Baztab*, 11 Tir 1386 / 2 July 1386,

²³ See M. Mohajeri, 'Ta'adol mahor basheed lotfan' (Balance please), *Baztab*, 26 Ordibehesht 1386 / 16 May 2007.

²⁴ Rasul Jafarian wrote a biting commentary comparing Ahmadinejad to the last Safavid Shah, Soltan Hussein: see 'Alajab kol alajab, bein jamadi va rajab!', *Baztab.com*, 30 Khordad 1386 / 20 June 2007, accessed 20 June 2007.

²⁵ See Fatameh Rajabi, *Ahmadinejad: Mojeze-ye hezare-ye sevom* (Ahmadinejad: the miracle of the third millennium) (Tehran: Nashr Danesh Amuz, 2005).

²⁶ See Abtahi, 'Martyrs of the war and triumph of Columbia University', *Webnevesht*, <http://webneveshteha.com/en/weblog/?page=2&cat=&search=>, accessed 1 Nov. 2007; 'Fath alfutoo daneshgah columbia fartar az fath fao', *Mizan News Agency*, 26 Oct. 2007, www.mizannews.com, accessed 2 Nov. 2007. For the book itself, see *Tajali-ye hoviati-ye Irani dar neeyork* (The glorious manifestation of Iranian identity in New York) (Tehran: Nashr Jomhur, Presidential Centre for Archives and Research, 1386 / 2007).

many of his hard-line supporters. Yet what has been most remarkable about these statements is that, despite the continuing criticism and the periodic equivocation, Ahmadinejad has consistently returned to the fray with even more extraordinary claims and strengthened conviction. It is as if his own distress necessitated even more enthusiasm: an internalized charismatic logic. Having declared victory in the nuclear crisis, Ahmadinejad has since announced that Iran has now achieved the status of a superpower, while in a recent speech in Mashhad he effectively argued that his government was the government of the Hidden Imam, and that his mission was global. Later responding to critics who said he should pay more attention to domestic inflation, he simply retorted that these were his beliefs and they should be respected.²⁷

Ahmadinejad's behaviour and rhetoric have bewildered, shocked and entertained Iranians in almost equal measure. While Iranians are disconcerted by his eclectic ideology, he nonetheless appears to have something for everyone, be they nationalist or devout Muslim. While many of the claims made by and for him are nonsensical and seemingly beyond ordinary comprehension—one supporter commented that the president could not be understood because he moved at the speed of a fighter jet²⁸—he nevertheless somehow manages to pull victory from the jaws of defeat (most recently in the aftermath of the National Intelligence Estimate) and to emerge in an even stronger position than before. The absence of a rational explanation for this resilience seems to point to more esoteric causes. Yet the reasons are not so hard to discern, especially when the historical and social context is appreciated. In proximate conditions, Ahmadinejad faces an emasculated opposition, an abundance of money, all the tools of state coercion and, perhaps most importantly, the consistent support of the Supreme Leader.

This relationship is particularly interesting, since one would have thought that Khamenei would have been jealous of his protégé. Indeed, Khamenei had never been convinced that Ahmadinejad was the tonic he required and had to be persuaded of this fact by his son Mojtaba. But, once convinced, he has stuck resolutely with his choice, vocally supporting him at key junctures during his presidency. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections in March 2008, Khamenei openly endorsed the administration and, along with other senior officials, called for a parliament of like-minded and supportive individuals. In the event, in one of the most heavily manipulated elections of recent years—even by Iranian standards—the Leader got his wish. In many ways, with personal critics of the president in a majority in the new parliament, Khamenei has finally emerged as the real victor of this prolonged process. He finally has a compliant parliament, rich in personal rivalry, competing for his favour. There is little doubt that Khamenei expects to institutionalize this

²⁷ For the original speech, see 'Iranian President says US President's life "empty"', text of speech delivered at the shrine of Imam Reza and broadcast on Iranian television, 5 May 2008, BBC Monitoring Online. For Ahmadinejad's response to the critics with a further explanation of his comments, see 'Iranian President claims higher living standards', press conference broadcast on Iranian television, 13 May 2008, BBC Monitoring Online.

²⁸ 'Sadeq Mahsuli: Sorat Ahmadinejad manand yek jet Phantom ast' (Ahmadinejad moves at the speed of a phantom jet), *Advar News*, 30 Mordad 1386 / 21 Aug. 2007, <http://www.advarnews.us/politic/print/5609.aspx>, accessed 30 Aug. 2007.

charisma within his person and a succession which he will direct. To achieve this he must continue to centralize power and monopolize the charismatic authority generated. Larijani is already being groomed, though it is by no means certain that Ahmadinejad will give up his place gracefully.²⁹ No matter. It is sufficient for these two gentlemen to compete for the Leader's favour.

Yet history would suggest that such triumphs are hollow. In suspending the republican experiment in post-revolutionary Iran and developing in its stead an autocracy founded on charismatic authority, the hard-line establishment has reinvented a power structure that is as inherently unstable as the power it bestows is intoxicating to the possessor.³⁰ And, as suggested above, Iranian political culture is better equipped than most to indulge the vanity of its leaders. What is perhaps most curious about this development is that the leaders themselves seem acutely aware of the fragility of the situation which they have created. For all their apparent popularity, they have yet to win an electoral contest in anything approaching a free and fair election. In this respect Ahmadinejad has been a singular failure. The reform movement may have been emasculated, but he has failed to translate populism into any form of democratic legitimacy. The arrogance of power rests on fragile foundations, and, for all the conceit, doubt persists. Indeed, repression and coercion have increased dramatically. One of the more interesting aspects of this self-awareness has been the continuing obsession of the hard-line establishment with the threat of a 'velvet revolution'—a preoccupation which baffles observers but is immediately recognizable to those with an appreciation of the traditional cycle of power in Iran.

What is perhaps truly perplexing is how this paranoia feeds itself and generates a potential for self-fulfilment. The cycle of distress and enthusiasm creates its own momentum, which the instigators may find increasingly hard to escape. With solutions proving elusive, ambitions increase and utopianism expands. Iran is no longer a sufficient platform for the spectacle which must unfold, and thus the international dimension is summoned in to serve the needs of a specifically domestic problem. Indeed, the continuation of a managed international crisis is central to the sustainability of this project. This is especially so given the particular nature of the charismatic authority being constructed and its increasing reliance on national motifs and symbolism—motifs for which the current leadership of the Islamic Republic is ill-suited. What complicates this particular conundrum is that, for all their vigilance against the potential emergence of a rival charismatic source of authority, these leaders have nonetheless created the social expectation that salvation is at hand, and that it will come from 'beyond' the system.³¹ It is a paradox of which the orthodox clergy are acutely aware, which is why the Shi'i *ulema* have vigorously argued against the dissemination of millenarian ideas. But

²⁹ Ahmadinejad's supporters are making dramatic claims of their own: see 'Mesbah-Yazdi supporters liken Ahmadinezhad to 1st Shia Imam', *Afjab*, 1 Nov. 2007, BBC Monitoring Online.

³⁰ Some have already warned about the development of an Islamic monarchy: see *Yas-e No*, 19 Bahman 1382 / 8 Feb. 2004, p. 1. Indeed, in many ways the Islamic Republic has now taken on the characteristics of a traditional Iranian dynasty.

³¹ The argument propounded by Ahmadinejad that the Hidden Imam is in fact behind his government and the Islamic Republic in general may have been aired to help counter this possibility. See n. 27 above.

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in a bid to establish domestic hegemony these ideas have been reinvigorated and unleashed. In the process the leaders of the Islamic Republic have come to resemble the monarchy they overthrew in more ways than they can imagine.