

## Post-Khomeini Iran: radicalism and civil war

by Thierry Lalevéé

The television scenes of mass hysteria during Ruhollah Khomeini's funeral on June 6 may have been the strongest political message to date as to Iran's immediate future in the post-Khomeini period.

This came as a sharp contrast to the seemingly smooth transition of power which occurred on June 4 when, less than 24 hours after Khomeini's death, President Ali Khamenei was elected as the Ayatollah's spiritual successor. However, the June 6 scenes of funeral rioting were doubtlessly the public expression of the real state of mind of the leaders of the so-called Islamic Republic of Iran.

Whether that republic can ultimately survive the death of its master is an open question. This was uppermost in the minds of the leadership which gathered on June 4 and decided to immediately appoint a successor to Khomeini, as a gesture of strength. Yet, behind the facade of national unity, which is expected to be maintained over the next 40-day period of mourning, each faction is sharpening its knives. Though the Islamic Republic is not about to collapse in the short term, the country is about to be engulfed in major political and social upheavals, which can be expected to last for weeks and months.

Ultimately the death of Khomeini is expected to have the following international and internal consequences:

### International crisis

Coming in the wake of China's plunging into a civil war, the upcoming Iranian crisis is an additional threat to the proponents of an American-Soviet condominium. Since the 1987 American-Soviet negotiations over the Persian Gulf which led to U.N. Resolution 598 and the August 1988 ceasefire, the consensus of the superpowers was that any attempts at changing or reorienting the political regime in Teheran, as

long as Khomeini was alive, were doomed to failure.

Subsequently both Washington and Moscow reached a tacit agreement that both would refrain from interfering until then.

Even though that agreement was violated in recent months with Moscow strengthening its economic and intelligence ties with Iran, Washington saw fit to close its eyes to the matter. Washington's assessment was that the present trend of Iran-Soviet negotiations was a mere game of pressures by the Iranian leadership against the West, and that the leadership around Khomeini would never agree to a strategic relationship with Moscow.

A new game is now on. Clearly both Moscow and Washington were caught unprepared, not expecting Khomeini's death to occur so soon, and being so ill-timed with the other ongoing international crisis. Their immediate reactions have been to claim neutrality. While Soviet party boss Mikhail Gorbachov sent a condolence message on June 6, stressing that good relations between the two countries were "closely associated with Khomeini personally," George Bush emitted a few wishful hopes on Iran's potentially releasing Western hostages.

More concretely, the State Department immediately moved in, giving strict orders to the Voice of America not to broadcast in its Farsi transmissions any calls for the overthrow of or rebellion against the regime.

Yet, how long can such a neutrality be maintained? Already by force of events, both the Soviets and the United States have been reorienting a large part of their regional intelligence operations toward monitoring Iran's internal fights. The KGB chairman may have told the *New York Times* a few weeks ago that cooperation between the KGB and the CIA was proceeding smoothly; the interests of both agencies,

as well as of both government will soon be conflicting.

A thorough investigation into the June 5 murder of Iranian monarchist, Col. Ataolla Bay Ahmadi, in Dubai, may be revealing as to the already ongoing intelligence warfare.

As Iran plunges into social strife, both superpowers will activate their political and intelligence assets to influence the power struggle in diverging directions, even though the Henry Kissinger group in particular may be reactivating its years-old plan for a division of the country and its sharing between both powers.

The mere publication of such a plan now, and any attempt at its implementation would send destabilizing shock waves throughout the region, endangering the very stability of the American-Soviet agreements reached on other parts of the region. But while Washington and Moscow are pondering the various geopolitical scenarios that would enable them to profit from the Iranian situation, events in the country are expected to take a turn for the worse in coming weeks.

### **Iran's internal strife**

Though a major political fight is to occur around the late-August presidential elections, those elections are not expected to resolve the matter. Right now and contrary to the public appearances, Iran is not led by Ali Khamenei, but by a troika made of the President and Khomeini's official spiritual successor together with Parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, as well as Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, the powerful chairman of the Assembly of Experts which elected Khamenei.

The principle of the troika was decided in the days which followed the official disgrace of Ayatollah Montazeri, then Khomeini's nominated successor, and they were de facto made public several weeks ago, when Khamenei decided to give full public support to Rafsanjani's bid for the presidency in August.

Yet both would have been powerless without the support of Meshkini. With the presidency, the Parliament, and Assembly of Experts under their control, they could move swiftly on June 4 to impose Khamenei. Ultimately, their plan is that by next August, a well-elaborated division of power will be established among the three, once Rafsanjani is elected as President with new kinds of executive powers—along the lines of the just-concluded constitutional reforms.

Yet the matters obviously does not end there. If the mass hysteria of June 6 is of any value in political terms, it has shown that the followers of the mullahs are now as radicalized, fanatical, and as militant as they were in February 1979, when they welcomed Khomeini.

### **'Moderation' not in view**

The political consequences are obvious. To maintain itself in power, the troika will have to ride the crest of the wave of militant Islam. The time for the Islamic Republic becoming more "pragmatic" and more "moderate" has certainly not

come. To the contrary, the present leadership will have to sponsor militant actions within the country and potentially abroad to establish its legitimacy.

Indeed, as far as Rafsanjani is concerned, Khomeini clearly died a month too early. His death has prevented the Speaker of the Parliament from making his long-expected trip to Moscow which, besides consolidating the relations between both countries, was to give him some kind of international legitimacy as Iran's top political leader.

Whether such a trip is being merely postponed or canceled altogether remains to be seen. Moscow has now to think twice whether it really wants to be involved in Iran's internal fight by favoring Rafsanjani now.

Meanwhile more radicalism will only prove right the more fanatics within the leadership who have definitely not given up hopes to reach full political power. Any reports announcing that Ahmad Khomeini has been inflicted a decisive political defeat, are not only premature but wrong. With no other official position than to be the son of the deceased Khomeini, Ahmad still enjoys the support of the Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, Security Minister Reyshahri and Hojatoleslam Mehdi Karroubi, chairman of the Foundation of the Martyrs and Khomeini's special representative to the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca).

Besides the obvious importance of both ministries, Karroubi is a powerful ally—he is also number two of the Parliament. His foundation is the main institution financing the Pasdarans (Revolutionary Guards) and the local Komitehs, the very grass roots of the Islamic movement.

Additionally, the political commissioner for the Pasdarans, appointed by Khomeini last winter, Sheikh Abdullah Nuri is also a close personal associate of Ahmad Khomeini. Likewise the present Chief of Staff, Gen. Ali Shahbazi was Khomeini's military *aide de camp* for several years.

These are powerful alliances to confront and challenge the power of the troika. In the immediate aftermath of the mourning period, Ahmad Khomeini's faction will launch its offensive. This may include Ahmad himself standing for the presidential elections. With no new elections for the Parliament immediately planned, the Parliament is still very much in the hands of deputies who have been hand-picked by Mohtashemi, creating a situation whereby the new President—whatever executive powers he may be given by the new Constitution—will be a mere political hostage.

Additionally, others factors have to be taken into account. While in disgrace, Ayatollah Montazeri still enjoys some popular support. His supporters will not remain idle.

The same can be said about former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and his friends, who have traditionally enjoyed the protection of Montazeri. Both groups may converge in their activities, however marginal.

Likewise, the opposition abroad is not expected to remain neutral, and each group is already gearing up, ready to intervene into the political fight.