

The Urge for Democracy

Akbar Atri

TEHRAN, IRAN—Today's Iranian students, too young to carry the baggage of the 1979 Revolution, are not as ideological as their elders who stormed the U.S. embassy and founded the *Daftar Tahkim Vahdat* (Office to Consolidate Unity, or DTV). Back then, those students provided much of the ideological motivation for the Islamic Revolution. Today, it is left to their children to correct the mistakes of the parents. And a quarter-century after it was formed to support the rule of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahkim Vahdat*, Iran's largest national student union, has become one of the most vocal critics of the regime in Tehran.

The DTV is made up of individual Islamic students' associations from over 60 of the country's universities. Within the organization, there are two factions. The minority faction, consisting of 5 to 10 conservative Islamic students' associations that prefer to continue operating within the current political system, claims to derive its legitimacy from the early days of the Revolution, and seeks to protect the Islamic Republic from what it sees as deviation.

By contrast, the majority faction, known as "Neshast-Allameh," consists of 50 to 60 Islamic students' associations and advocates a new democratic constitution based on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and its covenant. The majority faction no longer believes reform of the current Iranian system is possible.

This belief finds its roots in Mohammad Khatami's betrayal. When he met with university student representatives at the DTV headquarters in December 1996, the then-candidate had promised his audience that, if elected president, he would create a society based on the "rule of law." His appeal worked; student groups pledged their support, and they campaigned for him in their towns and on their campuses. When Khatami won the presidency in a landslide victory five months later with 70 percent of the vote, he owed much of his success to Iran's students.

During the first two years of the Khatami presidency, the country's youth supported his reformist agenda with high expectations for social and political change. This belief prompted university students to demonstrate July 8-14, 1999 in support of the very policies Khatami advocated. Their impetus may have been the closing of the liberal newspaper *Salaam*, a publication that represented freedom of expression, but their main motivation was hope for liberation from the cultural and political theocracy of the Iranian regime. But the student rallies were met with violent opposition and attacks by police, members of the right-wing *Basij* militia, the secret intelligence service and the *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, Iran's most prominent militant extremists.



AKBAR ATRI is a former member of the Central Committee of *Tahkim Vahdat*. In November 2005, he was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison by the Iranian regime.

Thereafter, the question on students' minds became: where was the "rule of law" that Khatami had promised? By the time the rallies came to a halt days later, the students felt betrayed by the president they had worked so hard to elect. That was the beginning of the end for the reform movement in Iran.

Today, it is important to understand the desire of the Iranian people, especially the country's young population, for a democratic and secular government. The people of Iran, a non-Arab country, have been struggling to become a democratic society for over 100 years. During this period, they have experienced injustice and manipulation by foreign powers. It is in this context that, after experiencing 26 years of theocracy under the Islamic Republic, they are ready for non-violent regime change through a national referendum for a new constitution based on universally accepted principles of human rights.

But the Iranian opposition needs help. Democratic communities abroad, with the United States in the lead, must support the Iranian people's pursuit of democracy and human rights.

So far, this has not happened. Rather, over the past quarter-century, successive American administrations have attempted, unsuccessfully, to negotiate, barter or coerce the Islamic Republic into changing its behavior. Each has been roundly rebuffed. The Iranian regime is not a reliable and stable government to negotiate with in good faith. The main reason is that its identity, in large part, derives from opposition to the United States. "Dialogue," therefore, is not only futile; it is construed as a sign of weakness in Tehran.

Regime change is the only answer. The Iranian people are ready to do their part, if the United States and other democratic countries are ready to stand with them.

