

The Iran paradox

By Nasrin Alavi,
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Iran's multi-layered political drama unfolds. The tensions are apparent in contrasting responses in Iran to the [address](#) [1] by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University's [World Leaders Forum](#) [2] on 24 September 2007. The front-page headline in the leading establishment newspaper *Kayhan* two days later mixed celebration and defiance: "Shock in New York: Iranian Logic Dazzled". The reaction to Ahmadinejad's "triumphant address" was similar across much of the ruling hierarchy and its media.

But a voice of dissent came from the Iranian student union *Tahkim Vahdat*. It published an open letter addressing the president directly, stating: "Your thoughtless unconsidered words have been at a great cost to the nation". The letter went on to ask why the president insisted on opening to debate the "massacre of Jews in the second world war, which is a bitter undeniable truth".

Ahmadinejad's taste for public speaking took him to Tehran University on 8 October 2007 to deliver a speech before the start of the academic year. The audience was handpicked, but outside the hall dissentient students were again on the scene to [confront](#) [3] him. The protesters, who had been denied access to the auditorium, chanted "death to the dictator" and held banners demanding: "We have questions too, why only Columbia?" Their protest was dispersed with the heavy-handed help of riot police and the *Basij* [4] militia.

Also at the scene was Sajad Safar-Harandi - the head of the *Basij* students at the University of Tehran and (in perennially nepotistic Iran, the son of the [minister of culture](#) [6] and Islamic guidance). He told reporters from the Iranian Students' News Agency (*Isna* [7]) that "some students and extremist elements in the past struggled with the aid of government officials to bring unrest to university, but they have to know that the university body is awake". He added a reference to 1999, a year which saw the most severe nationwide student unrest since the Iranian revolution, saying that such events are today unthinkable.

Safar-Harandi junior aptly recalls an era when *Tahkim Vahdat*, at one time Iran's largest student union, openly endorsed the election of [Mohammad Khatami](#) [8], giving his reformist agenda enormous backing in his landslide victory in the presidential election of 1997. Rightly or wrongly the students also felt empowered then, in being aligned with a government that had promised democratic change. Today there are no officials in

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"[Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fear](#) [5]" (1 November 2005)

"[Inside Iran](#) [5]" (14 February 2006)

government willing to give the time of day to any student bodies other than those represented by the likes of Safar-Harandi.

Tahkim Vahdat's [9] letter to the Iranian president - published on the eve of his speech at Tehran University - highlights its increased isolation by pointing out that since his election "44 student groups have been closed down, more than 130 student publications have been banned, more than 70 members of the union have been arrested and there are virtually no remaining student bodies in the universities of the land that are critical of the government. So where is the manifestation of this freedom of speech in Iran that you talked of in Columbia?"

Ali Fallahian [10], a hardline former minister of intelligence (in the government of Hashemi Rafsanjani [1989-97]), gave a rare interview to the Fars news agency on 8 October) which shed some light on the parameters of freedom of speech, Iranian-style. With no perceptible irony, he stated that prior to the Khatami reformist era (1997-2005), Fallahian and his colleagues had "created an atmosphere for an expansive cultural and economic discourse" that "we had the power to control" - but that under Khatami, "any event would quickly turn into a severe security threat, for instance we never had the 18th of Tir" (another reference to the nationwide protests of 9 July 1999 [11]).

Tehran's cross-currents

Today the public and media debates of the reformist era where writers, politicians and activists would openly question the legitimacy or the unaccountability of the supreme leader [12] or talk of constitutional reform are no longer imaginable. Alongside such restrictions, however, there is the near-bizarre sight of the establishment press regularly carrying critical reports or letters from readers highlighting public grievances. State-controlled television, meanwhile, transmits reports of deprived farmers, neglected schools or the bureaucratic chaos of the imposition of petrol rationing [13] in June 2007. Correspondents facing the camera often end interviews with a member of the public who has expressed some grievance by saying: "It is hoped that the relevant authorities take note".

In recent months Iran has endured an intensive summer crusade to banish widespread violation of the Islamic dress-codes, where many have been cautioned and arrested. Yet Iranian television viewers were able to watch a primetime interview where a young journalist asked some very tough questions of Brigadier-General Ahmad Reza Radan [14] (Tehran's police chief) about unnecessary police brutality against women and youth. America is still officially the "great satan", but terrestrial viewers are treated to the latest Hollywood blockbusters (including a Ben Stiller double-bill) to see them through the festival for the birthday of the prophet's grandson, *imam* Hossein.

Underground rap groups are brought into the fold, ditching their more dangerous lyrics to give approved performances to audiences in Tehran that include even government officials and members of the Revolutionary Guards [15]. Until a few years ago, a show by groups like the Kamkars [16] might be interrupted by hardliners; in summer 2007, Iranians were able to catch a performance of this Kurdish mixed ensemble without any such expectation, and resonant female vocals were heard at the *Talar Bozorgh Keshvar* (great national hall) which is under the management of Ahmadinejad's interior ministry.

Some see such leeway as a measure of the pressure for change coming from a new generation of young Iranians; others

Among **openDemocracy's** many articles about Iranian politics under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:

"Dariush Zahedi & Omid Memarian, "Ahmadinejad, Iran and America [14]" (15 January 2007)

Kamin Mohammadi, "Voices from Tehran [14]"

as partly a fight against the several foreign broadcasters that "target" Iran, including the Washington-backed Voice of America [17] (VOA). Since the student riots of 1999, disturbances have frequently spilled from the campuses onto the streets. In June 2003, ten days and nights of violent clashes between those seeking greater freedoms and the *Basij* were met with severe measures; Iranian government officials admitted to having arrested [18] 4,000 people during the demonstrations.

The intelligence minister Ali Younessi's then take on the issue was that "events outside the campus and the general discontent of the population are being guided by the foreign media and satellite stations". The Iranian authorities have consistently accused the United States of paying these news-media outlets [19] to destabilise the Islamic regime. This approach makes it easy to condemn student protestors as hooligans who dance to the tune of their masters in Washington.

A quiet turbulence

The newfound sense of confidence of the Iranian authorities is reinforced by America's difficulties in Iran's neighbours [20] to west and east, Iraq and Afghanistan. After the ousting of the Taliban in November 2001, a sardonic comment circulated widely in Iran: "At least next year we will be able to emigrate to and find jobs in Afghanistan". Today, however, it is Afghan refugees [21] who continue to seek work and refuge in Iran, rather than the other way round; any illusion that the United States, the world's sole superpower, could through the barrel of the gun liberate a nation and magically bring forth prosperity, democracy and peace have been shattered.

But something is stirring. On the afternoon of 9 October, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [22] - Iran's highest authority - had a meeting of his own with a group of students. He told [23] them that "my support for the government does not mean that I am against them being criticised", nor that "I approve of every detail of the work that is being done."

The signals, then, are mixed. Iran's political establishment has rediscovered a boldness that outwardly feels no threat from what the likes of Fallahian - accused of complicity [24] in the state-sponsored murder of intellectuals and dissidents in the 1990s - might call a "controlled free atmosphere". But the student protests that greeted [25] Ahmadinejad on 8 October indicate even to the supreme leader the unlikelihood of Iran's' burgeoning young population being impressed by mere lip-service to freedom of speech. They want the real thing. Iran's multi-layered political drama unfolds.

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