

OCCASSIONAL PAPER

No. 31

Tuesday, 4 June 2013

The Future of Political Messianism in Iran: New Trends and Expectations

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Iran's eleventh presidential election, to be held in June 2013, will be highly determinant both for the future of the country and the political fate of the current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The forthcoming election will be held under circumstances in which the lives of millions of Iranians are seriously affected by international sanctions which have been imposed on Iran. These sanctions, in addition to other factors such as economic inefficiency, financial corruption and mismanagement, have caused a general disappointment and resulted in poverty and desperation among the population. The following outlines the differences in the economic situation in Iran before and after the sanctions.

The main index for evaluation of the economy is the national currency, which is "hitting an all-time low and the prices of staple goods are soaring." Although officials (especially President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) have repeatedly rejected the prediction that the Rial will continue to drop against the Dollar as well as other currencies, it is a fact that the Rial and the economy is "crumbling under escalating western sanctions." The situation has worsened dramatically in the last year, when the new sanctions came into effect, resulting in a situation where "the prices of chicken, milk, cheese, bread, sugar and yogurt, among other staples, are now rising almost every day."¹

In the import sector, the costs of import prices are rising due to the crumbling Rial, and Iran's industry is also no longer able to compete. Reports state that "the industrial sector has laid off up to 800,000 workers this year and those who have kept their jobs are seeing their wages eroded by skyrocketing prices."²

Putting the internal factors that led the economic system to this situation aside, the effects of international sanctions on the economy and the financial system are undeniable. The economic breakdown has led to such socio-political disarray and obscurity that in the months approaching the election almost sixty political figures from various tendencies have declared their candidacy; this fact itself indicates the depth of disorder and discord prevalent in the polity. These candidates belonging to the Conservative section, can be divided into different sub-groups such as: a) the well-known figures like the last foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati and Haddad Adel, b) the mayor of Tehran Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, whose adherents consist of younger generations among Conservatives, “intellectuals”, allies in the Corps Guard, as well as his coterie in Tehran municipality, c) some ministers of the current government, and d) Ahmadinejad’s closest friend and relative, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. By crossing the red line of the Conservatives, Mashaei and his only patron Ahmadinejad, have constituted an opposition front against the rest of the candidates, although they are still regarded as adherents of Conservatism.

I want to focus on Mashaei’s cause, and argue that his brand of messianism, which is manifested in the slogan of the Iranian School, *Maktab-e Irani*, should be taken under consideration and treated, not as a solution to Iran’s numerous domestic and international problems, but rather a peril, which can, by and large, endanger Iran’s social and political solidarity.

Historical Background

Since time immemorial, messianism, whether in the form of socio-political movements or schools of thought, has been active and highly influential in Iran. Eschatological ideas related to the doctrine of messianism are manifested in the surviving texts of the *Avesta*, the Holy book of Zoroastrianism. According to the book, at the end of the time, a huge battle will occur between the forces of good and those of evil in which the good will triumph, and on earth, the saviour—*Saoshyant*—will bring about a resurrection of the dead. This is followed by a last judgment through ordeal.

Because of the dominance of Islam, and especially Shi’ism in Iran, the cultural and geographical milieu of the country has, at times, witnessed the formation of Shiite messianic movements. By messianism, I mean the belief in the *Mahdi*, the Twelfth Imam from the progenies of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law Ali. He is hidden and regarded as being the prophesied redeemer of Islam who will appear at a determinate time before the Day of the Resurrection. The doctrine of messianism and expectation for the appearance of the Hidden Imam as a saviour materializes the question of leadership in the age of Occultation.

Who would be in charge of affairs of believers in this period of time? To answer this vital question, which indeed raises the question of spiritual and political authority in the age of Occultation, jurists or scholars, *ulema*, referred to a famous tradition, *hadith*, by the Prophet stating that “the scholars are heirs of the prophet,” or “spokesmen” of the absent Imam.³

Alongside *ulema*, who were the main claimants of leadership, there emerged other groups, such as Sufi masters, theologians, and sultans, who were all conceived to be as the factual power holders. All of these groups claimed to be the only legitimate holder of the Prophet's power.⁴

Functioning within the context of the Islamic Law, none of these groups crossed the red line of the law and laid the claim of being the Hidden Imam's special intermediary among believers or his direct deputy.

One can classify all these claimants into a unified cluster that came to contrast, and in many cases conflict, with another cluster of claims generating from pretenders advocating esotericism. The cause of esotericism is a deep-rooted one in Islam, generating from the idea that the Quran is believed to hold and to contain two aspects: an outer or apparent meaning and an inner or hidden/secret meaning. The notion of God in the Islamic culture is also reflected as being the Hidden One; "whose absolutely non-manifest Being underpins the created realm."⁵ Concerning the question of leadership in the years of concealment, adherents of esotericism have set forth a variety of claims such as being specific vicegerent of the Imam and having direct connection with him, being his deputy in the community of believers, enjoying esoteric knowledge, as well as possessing the gift of interpretation, *ta'awil*, the divine revelation. Messianic movements developed their conceptualization of the leadership around these elements, as they stand at the core of esoteric tradition in Shi'ism.

Metaphorically, messianic fervour can best be typified as a volcano that at times has erupted and caused long-lasting consequences. The cultural and sociological scene of Iran, from time to time, has sporadically witnessed movements such as the *Hurufi* literally meaning "of letters" movement, as well as its offshoot *Nuqtavi* or in Arabic *Nuq'awiyah*, literally meaning "of the points" movement, Wed Wearers, Isma'il'i movement and its offshoots, as well as *Shaykhism*, *Babi*, and *Baha'i* movements. These movements that have sporadically appeared in the annals of Persian history could even take power and establish political dynasties.

They propounded the perpetual common messianic claims, which usually started with the claim of being the special vicegerent of the Hidden Imam, then developed it into the more radical cause of being the Imam, then further progressed to the idea of prophecy, and finally stopped at the point of Divine Manifestation. Each of these claimants, in turn, enriched this tradition and improved it by producing lots of remarkable literature.

A Double-Faceted Cause

Messianism has been both a political and religious catalyst. Perhaps, due to the confusion of the boundaries between religion and politics, and the influence one has had on the other, every political opposition could easily find a religious tone. So, to distinguish heresy from dissidence seemed to be impossible. To take it in its entirety, these movements maintained the idea of overthrowing unjust existing regimes and replacing them with just utopian ones. As Melay has certainly pointed out, according to ideologues of radical messianic movements, a fresh, non-existent social order would certainly be crystallized because corrupt and ineffective establishments were evidently unable to answer the questions of justice and injustice. In such a situation, they came to promise the advent of a just society which “could not be obtained through public instrumentalities.” Another question they attempted to answer was the dilemma of rule of law: “In a situation in which law functions as an instrument of state domination, rather than as a constraint on state power, its legitimacy will be compromised, and what is depicted as divine law is likely to be more appealing.”⁶

From this perspective, notions such as justice and injustice can greatly affect the minds of those who are suppressed, leading their practices, and shaping their expectation for the end of tyranny and wickedness through the establishment of justice, and the history could be easily “expressed in terms of radical social protest in the face of political oppression.”⁷

The yearning for the establishment of a utopian society following the destruction of the existing society is reflected in utopian literatures belonging to these movements. In many cases, the conceptualization and theorization of the doctrine of just society embodies theories and topics such as specifying relevant territory to erect a just society, designing appropriate slogan, propagating details of the new society, defining means and instruments to reach the goal, and so on. Secular utopian ideologies that represent another set of messianism share the same characteristics. So, apparently, religion is usually overshadowed by politics and the importance ascribed to and priority on ideologues and activists of messianism.

In modern Iran, for instance, Babism and Khomeinism are regarded as messianic movements in which politics has found priority over religion. Both of these movements had political ambitions, but both tactfully hid it under the mantle of religion and religio-moral critics of the society. They had an ambiguous outline of a just society, and in order to reach that outline, they successfully provoked their believers, organized them and mobilized their discontent toward religious and political establishments.

Mashaei and the Iranian School

Mahmud Ahmadinejad, since he took office in 2005, has received harsh criticism from conservative figures, especially from the Leader for having a close friendship with Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. Mashaei, who started his career at the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guard. He first met Ahmadinejad during the Iran-Iraq War in 1984, when Ahmadinejad was the governor of the city of Khoy in West Azerbaijan province of Iran. From 1984 to 2005, when Ahmadinejad became president, these two developed a close friendship and naturally Mashaei became an influential member of Ahmadinejad's cabinet in 2005. Since then, he has held key positions in the cabinet and been at the core of the dispute and dissatisfaction between Ahmadinejad and the conservatives.

By his pro-Israeli statements, and articulation of his ideas of the Iranian School, Mashaei exposed himself to attacks and critiques by some conservative figures such as Mesbah Yazdi and Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami. Yazdi condemned him for presenting and propagating anti-Islamic beliefs and ideas shamelessly,⁸ while Khatami stated that equating the school of Islam and the school of Iran resembles pagan nationalism which can never be accepted by the Muslim nation.⁹ Ironically, his deviant beliefs have not fired up any reaction in the Reformists so far. Perhaps they see the battle as an internal one which is hopefully going to weaken conservatism and should be welcomed. Even, independent intellectuals and critics have yet to take a position against it.

Neither Mashaei nor Ahmadinejad have given more details or clarified the idea of the Iranian School, but referring to their extremist beliefs regarding the Hidden Imam and the claim of having direct relationship with him, the Iranian School should be treated as a messianic, or more precisely, a pseudo-messianic cause. A messianic cause is a progressive cause. It starts with the false claim of having direct access to the Imam, progresses to receiving his advices and helps and being his agent or deputy, then developing into the more perilous claim of being the Imam himself, the Promised One, who has come to build a just society by destroying the existing unjust one. As history has shown, at this stage, the Imam's fake deputies or agents are actually true claimants of leadership, who find themselves authorized to announce a new phase, a revival, both in the life of a religion and a nation.

The Iranian School is composed of components such as the idea of sanctity of a certain territory and a nation; the priority of being Iranian over being Muslim; the stress on the necessity of religious revivalism that can be manifested in moving away from the current narrative of Islam and offering a new brand which is more nationalistic and equally radical, and last but not least, seeking the weakening of the Institute of the Guardianship of the Jurist as the hegemonic form of political establishment in Iran. Hitherto, The Iranian School and its self-confident claimants have

not been able to accomplish the first two, but certainly have been able to challenge Khamenei's authority.

The absence of prominent reformist or pro-reformist figures, coupled with Iran's economic despair increases the attractiveness of messianic claims. For this reason the strongly self-confident Mashaei should be taken seriously. In such a situation, people are looking for someone to be mankind's saviour. Moreover, Ahmadinejad is determined to impose his close confidant at every price. As the president and the one officially in charge of running the election, Ahmadinejad can disrupt the polling practice or, worse still, mobilize his advocates in the streets. The huge gathering of the Azadi stadium which was held weeks ago should be a warning for the establishment.

In principle, Mashaei-Ahmadinejad's fake messianism does not display any fundamental dissimilarity with other rivals. All of them present undemocratic despotic tendencies that view civil mechanisms such as parliament, newspapers, and NGOs, as unnecessary luxuries, or even troublesome, inhibiting direct accessibility of people to their rulers and vice versa. Mashaei's case is much perilous since history has proved to us that the distance from the claim of being the Hidden Imam's authorized deputy to the Mahdi of the Last Days is too short.

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Notes

¹ Saeed Kamali Dehghan and Julian Borger, "Iran's currency hits all time low as western sanctions take their toll," *The Guardian*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/01/iran-currency-rial-all-time-low>. In a newly published book in Persian by Mohsen Renani on the Political Economy of Iran under the Nuclear Dispute, which is accessible through his website www.renani.ir the author has warned readers as well as officials of the perils this program could have for the whole country.

² John Defterios, "Why Iran is caught in a currency crisis," CNN, 8 October 2012,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/10/07/business/iran-currency-analysis>

³ Abdul-Aziz A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: the Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 23.

⁴ The issue of leadership after the death of the Prophet is properly discussed in the Liyakat N. Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet; Charisma and Religious Authority in Shiite Islam*, (Albany: State University of New York, 2006).

⁵ For more information: Oxford Islamic Studies Online,

<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e314>

⁶ More details and also a good analysis of messianic movements and their connections with radicalism could be found here: William Maley, *Messianism and Political Action: Some Contextual Characteristics*,

<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/books/global/maley.htm#10>

⁷ Sachedina, Op.cit, p. 1.

⁸ Entekhab, <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/23116/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD-%DB%8C%D8%B2%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%85%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%BA%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF>

⁹ <http://www.sedayeshia.com/showdata.aspx?dataid=5112>