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Dark side of a reformist win in Iran

By Mohsen Sazegara
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ON FRIDAY, my fellow Iranians will cast their vote for the Islamic Republic's next president. If some of the polls are to be believed, the victor may very well be a reformist, either former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi or former Parliament speaker Mehdi Karroubi.

A reformist victory would bring a thankful end to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, but there ought not be any illusions about the impact Mousavi or Karroubi could have on Iranian society. As was made clear during the presidency of Ahmadinejad's reformist predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, the conservative establishment does not go quietly into the opposition when its candidates lose.

For all the reforms made during the Khatami era, real power in Iran never left the hands of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The supreme leader's conservative allies retained control over the security forces, as well as the judiciary and the media, and simply circumvented the rule of law when their stranglehold on the country was challenged.

The violation of Iranian and international law by Khamenei loyalists was rampant between 1997 and 2005. Throughout Khatami's presidency, a vast parallel intelligence apparatus operated beyond the authority of the government, brutally intimidating and silencing those viewed as critical of the regime.

Few in the West will probably have heard of this shadow intelligence world. Though the existence of clandestine agents was not a secret in Iran, there is little official documentation of their activities or identities. Yet I can say that I know of what I speak.

In 2003, I was one of their victims. I was illegally detained by agents and held captive in notorious Section 325 of Tehran's Evin Prison for 114 days, 56 of them in solitary confinement.

Many fellow Iranians suffered through similar ordeals, or worse. That much has been made clear in the many stories told to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center,

which has made a laudable effort to record the abuses committed in Section 325 and other secret detention facilities.

Violent treatment was a staple of the clandestine agents' interrogation methods, and was designed to coerce victims into confessing to contrived criminal charges. Torture, however, was not the only tactic used by parallel intelligence units. In addition to running at least half a dozen illegal detention facilities, agents also conducted warrantless investigations, surveillance, arrests, and searches and seizures of property.

As is now clear, the clandestine agents were far from rogue operatives. The testimonies collected by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center point to the organizational and operational involvement of a number of agencies controlled by the Office of the Supreme Leader.

The Revolutionary Guard, which I helped establish 30 years ago, was involved. So, too, were the Iranian Army, Khamenei-allied police units, and the Basij and Ansar-i Hizbullah paramilitary groups. The ranks of the parallel intelligence apparatus also included Khamenei loyalists in the Ministry of Intelligence, Ministry of Defense, judiciary, and state-run media. With these agencies effectively controlled by the Office of the Supreme Leader, the conservative establishment simply circumvented the Khatami government in its brutal campaign to silence the voices of reform.

In 2005 the clandestine intelligence activities were sharply curtailed, but the return to the rule of law was hardly the result of a change in policy. With a fellow hard-liner in the president's office, Khamenei and his allies could pursue their agenda through the halls of power, and had little need for the illegal parallel intelligence apparatus.

That may very well change if Mahmoud Ahmadianajad is voted out of office. One can only wonder what may transpire if a reformist slate is indeed victorious in the upcoming elections.

I would not presume to know the thoughts of Ali Khamenei, but I do know what the supreme leader's henchmen are capable of - and it is that knowledge that makes me shudder at the prospect of a Mousavi or Karroubi presidency.

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