

Washington Post

Hungering for Reform in Iran

Akbar Ganji Puts His Life on the Line

By Roya Hakakian

Sunday, August 21, 2005; B03

The debate over Iran's quest for nuclear weapons has produced thousands of headlines over the past couple of years, but anyone who's been following closely should know this much: There is no real news there. The issue has become a mere political symphony in which the same theme gets repeated over and over with only small variations. Yet it still gets significant coverage in the global media.

To those, like me, who lived through the 1979 hostage crisis in Iran, this is eerily reminiscent of what happened then. After 444 days in captivity, the American hostages returned home -- without a single one of Iran's demands being met. Yet the country's revolutionary hard-liners had scored the victory that counted: While the world was fixated on the hostages, they had annihilated all internal opposition and consolidated their grip on power.

Today, the hard-liners are rejoicing once again, for now the nuclear debate is eclipsing the most important current headline about Iran. That headline is simply the name of a man: Akbar Ganji.

The threat of a nuclear standoff with Tehran is, by most accounts, at least 10 years away, but the democratic antidote to that possibility is perishing as I write. A prominent investigative journalist, Ganji has been in jail since 2000 for putting out a slew of articles, books and lectures that amount to a comprehensive one-man campaign against Iran's ruling clerics. From prison, he has sent out a daring manifesto containing the five words no one else in the country has dared to utter: "The supreme leader must go!" -- a declaration all the more powerful for being a dramatic echo of the late Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary war cry against the shah in the 1970s.

Now, Ganji is in the end stages of a second hunger strike to protest his imprisonment. Yet even with his blood pressure falling and clots accumulating in his veins, he still stands as the most formidable challenge to Iran's theocracy in 26 years.

That challenge began years ago, capping a remarkable evolution that took Ganji from hard-line Islamist and fervid supporter of the revolution to Iran's most outspoken advocate of secularism, the embodiment of a metamorphosis that the Western world longs to bring about in the Middle East. The son of a laborer, born and raised in the destitute neighborhoods of south Tehran, Ganji answered Khomeini's call as a teenager and joined the ayatollah's movement. He quickly rose through the ranks to become a leader of the Revolutionary Guards. In 1985, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance appointed him its cultural attaché in Turkey. By then, however, Ganji had begun to question the status quo in Iran. According to his successors, he began a series of conversations with the youth of Turkey's Islamic Rafah Party. By the end of his stay, he had managed to dissuade them from following in the footsteps of hard-line Iranian Islamists, turning the 1979 revolution into a cautionary tale for other aspiring radicals.

After returning to Iran in 1988, Ganji joined the staff of Kian quarterly, Iran's leading journal of modern Islamic theory and philosophy. His work at the magazine, and with the 25 writers and influential religious intellectuals known as the Kian Circle, marked the real turning point of his evolution from revolutionary to reformer. The circle gathered every Wednesday evening to discuss politics and, as most of them held prominent government positions, the country's direction.

It was there, under the mentorship of Abdolkarim Soroush, one of the world's leading Islamic theoreticians, that Ganji reexamined all of his most venerated totems: Khomeini, the notion of the Islamic republic, and finally Islam itself. He remains to this day a believer in God and in Islam, but -- after years of imprisonment -- he also believes that separating religion and state is an essential prerequisite for democracy.

At first, Ganji had hoped that Iran's transition to democracy could be accomplished through reform and from within. So he threw his support behind the 1997 campaign that brought former president Mohammad Khatami to power. But by the end of Khatami's first term, Ganji had concluded that reform was impossible within the boundaries of the current constitution. He broke away from many of his comrades, and from the circle, to endorse the idea of a national referendum. Since the Islamic republic had been voted in through a national referendum in April 1979, Ganji and a handful of others put forth the idea of repeating that referendum as a peaceful way out of the current impasse in Iran.

Ganji has his share of critics -- from the puritanical members of the diaspora for whom trusting a former Khomeini sympathizer is anathema (and who wish to put him on the stand before a truth commission someday for his involvement in establishing the regime) to left-leaning intellectuals and scholars who say that his cause would be noble had he not become a pawn in the hands of American neoconservatives. But the neocons are a facade behind which these scholars hide their lack of vision for Iran. In June 1999, they viewed the historic student uprising, the greatest display of protest in Iran since the revolution, with the same degree of suspicion. When it failed and those involved were arrested, and the prospect of reform gradually died, they cited the neocons and the U.S. invasion of Iraq as the reason for the students' failure.

If the words, "The supreme leader must go!" are historic, it is not only for their truth, or their unadorned clarity, or the courage with which they are spoken. Courage has been in ample supply in Iran since 1979. There have been many others just as resilient as Ganji: Abbas Amir-Entezam, deputy prime minister of Iran's post-revolutionary provisional government, refused to sign a recantation letter that would have absolved him of the charge of "espionage for the Great Satan," and remained in prison for 20 years. The journalist Faraj Sarkuhi, kidnapped by intelligence agents in 1996, managed to send a note that told the world about his captivity and brought about his freedom.

But Ganji possesses courage and more. He has produced an intellectual blueprint to contemporary Iranian politics, the regime, its flaws and the way forward. After publishing his seminal books of investigative journalism, in which he traced the murders of leading dissidents inside and outside the country to the country's highest leadership, he tackled the system as a whole. Being locked up in solitary confinement proved to be an opportunity for him to focus and

produce his two "Republican Manifestos." These extended essays make two key points: That a "supreme leader" is incompatible with democracy, as is the mixing of Islam with the affairs of the state. A religiously eclectic country like Iran, he asserts, must do away with "official religion."

In the country where just last month two young men were publicly hanged for sodomy, Ganji writes these words from prison: "My voice will not be silenced, for it is the voice of peaceful life, of tolerating the other, loving humanity, sacrificing for others, seeking truth and freedom, demanding democracy, welcoming different lifestyles, separating the private sphere and the public sphere, religion and state, promoting equality of all humans, rationality, federalism within a democratic Iran, and above all, a profound distaste for violence."

In response to a letter from his mentor Soroush, who pleaded with him to break his hunger strike, Ganji displayed his originality as a thinker. He respectfully defied the master who taught him much of what he knows. Recalling the experience of Italy under the fascists, he declared that the supreme leader is Iran's Mussolini. And as the master instructed, a tyrant should not be tolerated. "Freedom and democracy come at a price," the pupil writes in his letter, "and I am here to pay my dues." Ganji is foreshadowing his own death. If he maintains his hunger strike and dies, it will be a grave loss. But the fundamental ideas that he has put forth will be the departure point for any future democratic movement in Iran.

Twenty years ago, when I was a disillusioned teenager in Tehran, the possibility that I would someday write in defense of a former member of the Revolutionary Guards would have seemed unthinkable. The Guards had robbed the Iranian people of the egalitarian dream the revolution had once instilled, even in minorities -- even in a Jewish girl like me. But for my change of heart, I deserve no credit. It is Ganji, and others like him throughout history, whose quest for justice soothes the wounds of a dictator's assault, and leads the bitter exile to forgiveness.

Author's e-mail:

Roya@RoyaHakakian.com

Roya Hakakian, a freelance journalist, is the author of two books of poetry in Persian and the memoir "Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran" (Crown).