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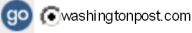

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In Iran, a Hostage-Taker Is Now Hostage

By Robin Wright
Sunday, August 9, 2009

Last week Iran's theocracy widened its crackdown from suppressing an opposition movement to [putting on trial](#) the very revolutionaries who launched the Islamic republic. This new purge may be more profound politically than the campaign against the followers of Mir Hossein Mousavi: The Iranian revolution is eating its children.

Mohsen Mirdamadi saw it all coming. He warned me about it five years ago. The only thing he didn't foresee was his own role. Last week, he sat in a revolutionary court, dressed in gray prison pajamas, as one of its victims.

I've followed Mirdamadi since the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover. In 1981, I stood below the plane that brought 52 American diplomats to freedom in Algeria and wondered about the type of people who seized, interrogated and brutalized hostages for 444 days. Mirdamadi was one of three ringleaders. Former hostage John Limbert remembers him as "particularly nasty." I met him a decade ago.

Like many early revolutionaries, Mirdamadi had evolved over the intervening two decades from a scruffy student radical into a balding, pinstripe-suited realist. In 2000, he ran for parliament as a reformer.

"Our emphasis originally was on winning independence from foreign influence and creating an Islamic state," he explained at the spartan headquarters of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, just two blocks from the old U.S. Embassy. "But today our emphasis is on freedoms. . . . Our tactics have shifted, too. Before, we carried out a revolution. Today, we're trying evolution."

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A surprisingly small man, Mirdamadi took the powerful chairmanship of parliament's national security and foreign relations committee, a platform he used to advocate political openings, freedom of assembly and speech, women's rights, and an independent press, albeit within the boundaries of Islamic propriety. He launched the newspaper Norouz -- or New Year -- which advocated the rule of law and challenged authority. Ultimately, the authorities charged him with libel, subversion, "encouraging hooligans to

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undermine public order" and propagating "moral decadence." The paper was banned.

Unrepentant about the hostage drama, he nevertheless urged better relations with Washington. "Once enmity with America was in line with our interests," he said in 2002, "but it is not like that today. Our interests today lie in detente with America."

Mirdamadi came to represent the forces that carry revolutions into their final

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phase, what Crane Brinton in his classic "The Anatomy of Revolution" called "the convalescence." But he apparently went too far. When he registered to run for reelection in 2004, he was disqualified by the clerical Council of Guardians despite his fame. Dozens of incumbents and some 2,500 others were also disqualified. Mirdamadi led a mass resignation of 124 parliamentarians, almost half the total, in protest. It was the beginning, he told me a few months later, of what he feared would become a "bloodless coup."

In 2006, he became leader of his party, the largest reform faction. In 2008, he backed Mousavi for president. And in June, he was among the first arrested when Iran's uprising erupted. While Mirdamadi was in parliament, Amnesty International issued 13 "urgent action" appeals asking supporters to write him demanding the release of political prisoners. Last month, it issued an appeal about him -- as a political prisoner.

Mirdamadi sat in court last week with 100 others, including a former vice president, cabinet members, presidential advisers and spokesmen. An Iranian news agency said some may face charges of being "mohareb," or God's enemy, which can carry the death penalty. The best-case scenario is that, after more "confessions," they are pardoned but banned from politics and their parties dissolved.

The irony -- one of many in the current crisis -- is that the purge taking place to prevent an allegedly foreign-backed "velvet revolution" may in fact spur one. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's [inaugural speech](#) Wednesday was full of inane bluster. "We must play a key role in the management of the world," he told parliament.

But the regime only looks more desperate with each passing week. Tens of thousands of security forces had to be deployed in Tehran to preserve order on inauguration day, yet YouTube snippets still showed Iranians on crowded subway escalators shouting "death to the dictator" for all to hear. The widening polarization of society will make it difficult for Ahmadinejad to rule during his second term.

"The goals of the revolution are being forgotten as this government becomes more of a dictatorship," Mirdamadi said, predicting the current turmoil. "But people still want change."

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