

THE WORLD

International

Iran's Kurds: autonomy or else

FROM OUR TEHRAN CORRESPONDENT

A Kurd in Iran has been, since time immemorial, a second class citizen: a ridiculed, ill-educated figure in baggy pants, with a pistol in his cummerbund, as likely as not employed on a building site in Teheran and all but ignored by the central government.

Little has changed with the revolution. If anything, the arrogance of the Shia Moslem leadership towards this largely Sunni minority is resented even more than the tight-reined neglect of the Shah. Despite some 500 dead in last month's clashes in Sanandaj and at least 200 more in and around the town of Naqadeh over the past week, it is a remarkable fact that neither Mr Bazargan's government nor the Islamic Revolutionary Council is yet giving serious thought to the question of regional autonomy for Iran's 3½m Kurds.

The government's contrasting reaction to Arab demands is instructive. At the height of the latest flare-up in Kurdistan,

the religious leader of the small Arab community in the south-west threatened to leave Iran if Arab demands for equal rights were not met. Both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Taleghani immediately sent reassuring messages.

Teheran seems to have a mental blank when it comes to rethinking old attitudes towards the Kurds. But if it is confirmed that the assassination on April 22nd of the republic's first armed forces' chief, General Qarani, was the work of militant Kurds, the Kurdish question will take on a new dimension. Leaflets have claimed that the Kurds killed Qarani to punish the army for its heavy-handed repression of the Sanandaj trouble.

The effect of the latest fighting will be to harden attitudes on both sides. It should also strengthen support for the Kurdistan Democratic party, the longest established and best organised political group in the region. The KDP, led by an intellectual socialist, Abdurrahman Qas-

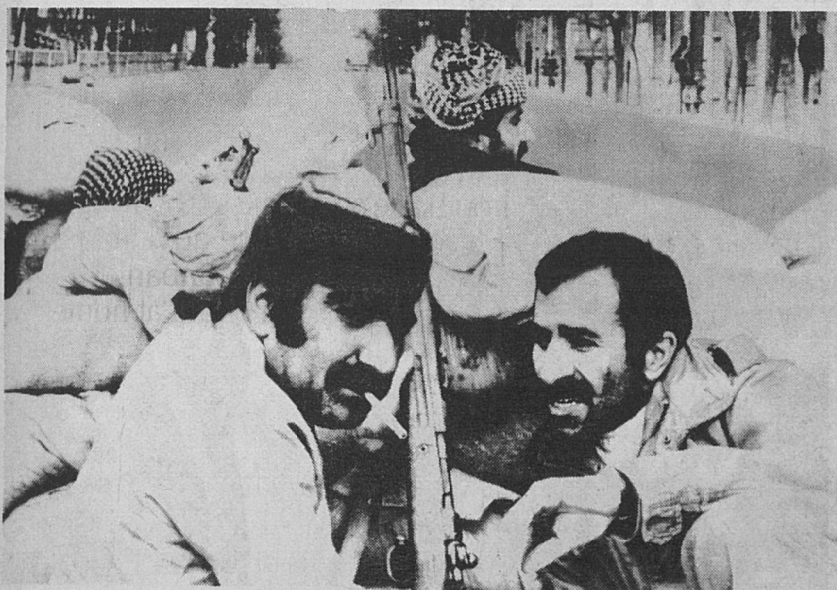


semou, has come out into the open after a 30-year ban under the Shah, and is now busy recruiting and strengthening its position.

Its main rivals are the supporters in Iran of the late Iraqi Kurdish leader, Mullah Mustapha Barzani. These mostly conservative, rural and tribal groups include followers of the moderate Sunni leader from Sanandaj, Ahmad Muftizadeh, and the less numerous Shia Kurds from farther south. Left-wing guerrilla groups, the Fedayin and the Mujahaddin, have their adherents among urban Kurdish youngsters but they count for little in Kurdish politics.

The Kurdish Democratic party is both a political and military organisation. When its meeting in Naqadeh on April 20th was attacked by Turkish-speakers (who share the region with the Kurds), it was quickly able to round up thousands of armed supporters. What began as an urban battle rapidly developed into several days' communal strife, in which villages were burnt and atrocities committed on both sides. Attempts to impose a ceasefire succeeded only when the army was sent in against the Kurds, who then withdrew back into their heartland to nurse their wounds. On Wednesday, the KDP claimed that the army was ignoring the ceasefire agreement and that tanks and helicopters had again attacked Kurdish villages. The party put the number of Kurdish dead over the past six days at 500.

The fighting will have hardened the resolve of all Kurds to capitalise on their exclusive control of the guns and the municipal councils in the regions where they are in the majority. In the aftermath of the February revolution, the Kurdish Democrats demanded self-rule as the price for their support for the anti-Shah



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News

movement. They were prepared then to be flexible and to trust in the good faith of the provisional government. Much of that trust has now been dissipated.

Today their minimum demands are a geographically defined Kurdish region, embracing much of the western borderland, taking in the present provinces of Ilam, Kermanshahan, Kordestan and parts of Lorestan and eastern Azerbaijan; a popularly elected regional assembly; and some voice in the composition of the military units stationed in their region along the sensitive Iraqi border.

Kurdish leaders recognise that what is granted to them will also have to be offered to the Turkomans in the north-east, the Baluchis in the south-east, the Arabs in the south-west and, probably (the biggest and administratively most difficult group of all) the 11m Turkish-speaking Azerbaijanis of the north-west. Still, the Kurdish leaders insist, there is no other way to preserve the Iranian patchwork as a single piece.

The government's first response was to promote Ahmad Muftizadeh as the "single recognised leader" of the Kurds, rather than the more radical and more representative Sheikh Ezzedin Hosseini of Mahabad. Then, after the Sanandaj riots it promised to set up local councils and to consider wider constitutional issues in the, now indefinitely postponed, constituent assembly.

For years the Shah played on the argument that it was the monarchy alone which could transcend Iran's all too obvious differences. Buttressed by rigid central control and a basic antipathy to decentralisation, the country was held together by force, not consent. Anything that replaced such a system would, in the short term, have to face powerful centrifugal tendencies. The spring is now uncoiling fast.

The Kurds' dilemma is that, unlike the Azerbaijanis, they have up to now had very little political weight in Teheran. Muzzled by Savak, the Shah's secret police, and deprived of their guns, they were unable even to use their strategic location as leverage for better treatment. Those few Kurds who have achieved high political office had long before lost their tribal ties. Teheran governments have always found it easy to play on internal divisions among the Kurds in Iran and also in the wider pan-Kurdish movement, involving 12m people in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Unless a more enlightened approach is adopted in Teheran, the prospect is for ever more bitter outbreaks of violence. It may take a joining of forces by the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey before the government of Iran begins to treat the Kurdish issue as a political not a military problem.

Rhodesia

Bishop sweeps board

FROM OUR SALISBURY CORRESPONDENT

Rhodesia's black electors left no doubt about who it was they wanted as head of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia's first black-led government. They gave Bishop Abel Muzorewa's party, the United African National Council, 1.2m votes, 67% of those cast. This gives the UANC 51 of the 72 black seats in the 100-seat assembly, a slender overall majority.

In the cabinet, however, Bishop Muzorewa will command a majority only if he, as prime minister, is allowed a casting vote. Under the coalition agreement signed last year, each party winning five or more seats in the assembly is to get cabinet posts in proportion to its assembly seats. So the bishop's party will have 10 posts, Mr Ian Smith's white Rhodesian Front six, and Mr Sithole's Zanu and Chief Ndiweni's United National Federal party two each. Chief Chirau's party failed to win a single assembly seat.

The UANC swept the board in the urban and rural constituencies in Mashonaland, where it got 80% of the votes. In Matabeleland it was pushed into second place by Chief Ndiweni's party. The chief, a Ndebele, apparently attracted support there as a surrogate for the popular Ndebele leader, Mr Joshua Nkomo. He also got votes from the whites and tribal minorities who support his party's idea of a federal system that would avert Shona domination. But there

was a low turnout in that region, with only 45% of the electorate voting and, in one province, nearly 10% of the ballots being spoiled.

There were also relatively low turnouts in Manicaland, the Midlands and Victoria, where the Patriotic Front guerrillas were more successful than in Mashonaland in keeping voters away from the poll. The average turnout in these three provinces was 47%, but the bishop came out on top in each. An analysis of the voting by regions shows that his UANC won twice as many votes in Mashonaland as it did outside it, partly because of tribal loyalties but also because guerrilla intimidation was more effective outside Mashonaland and the largest urban areas.

Bishop Muzorewa will not be sworn in as prime minister until the end of May, as the electoral process goes on until May 23 when the 30 senators are to be elected: 10 black chiefs by the council of chiefs, 10 whites by the 28 white MPs and 10 blacks by the 72 black MPs. The bishop would not be drawn this week on the size of his cabinet or on what post he will offer to the present prime minister, Mr Ian Smith. Putting Mr Smith into a sensitive slot such as defence (known as combined operations) or law and order would not enhance the prospects of recognition by foreign governments, but Mr Smith, who remains unrepentantly proud of his past record, will certainly bargain hard for a powerful cabinet job.

The future of Mr Sithole also promises to cast a shadow. Last week he had praised the poll, but this week he claimed that there had been "gross irregularities". He alleged that officials had "stage-managed" the election to the advantage



She backed a winner