

IRAN

Mullahs Divided

Right-wingers vs. Khomeini

In less than three years, Iran's tumultuous revolution has spawned a staggering array of problems: civil violence, war with Iraq, economic ruin, international isolation. Yet, however untidy their methods, the country's ruling clergymen seemed united in their dedication to establish an Islamic republic. Now, apparently, that solidarity is vanishing, if indeed it ever existed in the first place. Having ruthlessly eliminated their secular opponents, the mullahs have lately turned on each other, arguing over everything from the sacred (Islamic law) to the profane (the spoils of political power).

The divisions have pitted Muslim against Muslim, faction against faction—and, increasingly, right-wing mullahs against the revolution's leader, the Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini. Though the disputes have so far been contained, they have become worrisome enough to elicit a pointed warning from Khomeini: "Let no one doubt that if dissension continues between groups committed to Islam, it will spread nationwide and lead to armed confrontation."

The clerical battle lines have not been clearly drawn. But there have been struggles between the Islamic Guards, the clergy's private army, and the Friday Prayer Leaders, Khomeini's personal representatives throughout Iran. And in recent weeks a number of right-wing clergymen have agitated publicly for a share of political power, now monopolized by the ruling, Khomeini-backed Islamic Republic Party (I.R.P.). One source of their discontent: Khomeini's announcement on Oct. 12 that he was delegating some functions of the cherished *Velayat-e-Faqih* (Supreme Theologian's Mandate)* to the Majlis (parliament).

Khomeini took that step to end a deadlock between the parliament and the "guardian council," a twelve-member constitutional watchdog committee, which for religious reasons had blocked needed reform legislation. Still, his questionable action offended many right-wingers. Said one ayatullah: "It is bad enough that his understanding and application of the [mandate] are faulty and self-ish. His decision to suspend Islamic law for political expediency is apostasy. If his so-called Islamic republic cannot survive the application of God's law, then there is something wrong with his system. God does not make defective laws."

The fundamentalist challenge is dangerous for Khomeini, particularly

*The founding principle of Khomeini's theocracy holds that pending the return of the promised Shi'ite messiah, the Twelfth Imam, a supreme theologian with absolute powers must lead the Islamic community.

because his right-wing critics can outdo him in blind radicalism and rabble-rousing. An outstanding example of the obscure but dangerous figures growing angry with him is Sheikh Mahmoud Halabi, seventyish leader of a Shi'ite purist society. Halabi, says one Iranian writer, "is so right wing that compared with him, Khomeini is Karl Marx." Halabi criticizes the I.R.P. for its political accommodation with the Tudeh Party, Iran's pro-Moscow Communists. (The arrangement is designed to counter opposition from left-wing Muslims.) And he calls for a program against "heresy and atheism." As for Khomeini's claim to the Supreme Theologian's Mandate, Halabi insists it is not binding. Khomeini may have great virtue and theological scholarship, he says, but "I have re-



Khomeini waving to supporters in Tehran

A challenge by unhappy fundamentalists.

ceived instructions from the absent Imam [the Shi'ite messiah] himself."

As Iran's troubles deepen, divisions among the clergy are likely to grow. In an effort to strengthen their ranks, relative moderates in the I.R.P. have already begun to rehabilitate thousands of technocrats and politicians the party once purged for being "pro-Western and liberal." Among them: Mehdi Bazargan, the revolution's first Prime Minister, now a member of parliament. Last week, in a secret session of the Majlis, Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani asked his fellow legislators to spare Bazargan and the others from more ridicule. Said he: "These gentlemen are closer to the Imam [Khomeini] than many of you." But recourse to "pro-Westerners" can only alienate the right-wingers more. And in a nation further divided, claims of friendship with the Imam may not mean what they once did. ■

SEYCHELLES

If It's Thursday

This must be a coup—oops!

As they boarded their flight in Swaziland last week, the burly young men in blazers, sports shirts and flannels looked every inch a South African rugby club off on a holiday to the Seychelles, the small (pop. 65,000), sun-drenched chain of islands off the East African coast. But soon after they arrived at Mahé's airport, their vacation plans went abruptly awry. When a surprised immigration official discovered a gun in one of the visitors' bags, the chap's companions whipped out automatic weapons. Obviously, this was no ordinary package tour. This was a coup, and the sportsmen were mercenaries hired to topple the left-wing regime of President Albert René.

After the mercenaries waged a 20-hour airport battle with government forces, the coup collapsed. Forty-four of the mercenaries escaped by hijacking an Air India Boeing 707 that had landed during the battle; the others were dead, arrested or in hiding. President René launched a nationwide man hunt and ordered all foreigners in the islands—including visiting U.S. Ambassador William Harrop—confined to their hotels.

The attackers—mostly said to be former members of Rhodesian and South African army units as well as a few Americans, Britons and other Europeans—were reportedly paid \$1,000 and promised a further \$10,000 if their mission was successful. It was unclear who put up the money. René, 46, who was established in power by a coup in 1977, has plenty of enemies. His Marxist leanings have embittered wealthy islanders and prompted two previous coup attempts.

This time the mercenaries planned to infiltrate Mahé after they landed and stage the coup later in the week, possibly as the first phase of a bigger operation involving local sympathizers and a back-up force of other mercenaries. But the premature shootout left the scheme in shambles and the first wave of attackers stranded at the airport—until they captured the control tower and gave the Air India plane permission to touch down. The landing was nearly a disaster: the pilot just missed a Seychelles army truck parked on the runway and was forced to hop over another, which the plane did brush with a wing flap. "I'm afraid you have arrived at a most unfortunate moment," one of the mercenaries told the 79 startled passengers and crew on board as mortar and machine-gun fire blazed around them. "You'll just have to wait." Three hours later, the surviving soldiers of fortune, carrying the body of a dead comrade, trooped onto the plane and ordered it to fly to South Africa. Arrested upon landing at Durban, they now face prison terms of five to 30 years for hijacking. ■