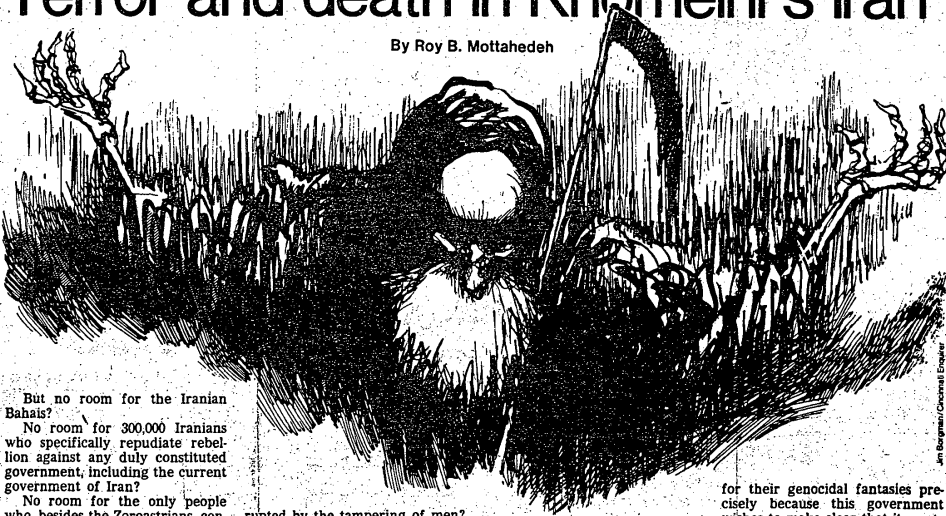


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Terror and death in Khomeini's Iran

By Roy B. Mottahedeh



News of the barbarous execution of 16 Bahais in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz last week has shattered the small remaining hope of many well-wishers of the Iranian revolution who kept saying, as I did: "Wait, give it time."

Six men and 10 women, including three teen-age girls, without publicly announced charges or public trial, were hanged, apparently for the mere crime of adherence to a religion. As the Islamic judge explained to the newspapers: "It is absolutely certain that in the Islamic Republic of Iran there is no place whatsoever for Bahais and Bahaism."

It is becoming increasingly unclear for whom there is a place in Iran.

It was possible to understand why the Iranian government felt that there was no place for the radical left, which advocated armed struggle against the existing government.

It was harder — but just possible, given the deep differences between peoples about ideas of propriety — to understand why there was no place for women who went out in public without their hair covered.

It was even harder to understand why there was no place for the Iranian Communist Party, which repeatedly and slavishly had declared itself to be in total support of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Roy P. Mottahedeh, professor of Islamic history and Persian and Arabic literature at Princeton University, is writing a book on Shiite education in modern Iran.

But no room for the Iranian Bahais?

No room for 300,000 Iranians who specifically repudiate rebellion against any duly constituted government, including the current government of Iran?

No room for the only people who, besides the Zoroastrians, consider Iran a sacred land and revere the Persian language as a language of revelation?

For the only religion in Iran besides Islam that, however much it may look to a prophet subsequent to Mohammed, accepts the belief of Moslems that the Koran is an infallible revelation from God in a text that, unlike the Old and New Testaments, has never been cor-

rupted by the tampering of men? Well-wishers of the revolution waited and gave it time — and for what?

To see the promise of parliamentary democracy blasted by an intolerance of any political party that meekly disagrees with the government?

To find the universities still largely shut four years after the revolution, while Iranians suffer

from a severe shortage of qualified teachers and technical experts?

To see proud, courageous Iranian soldiers lay down their lives in human-wave attacks in the stale mated war against Iraq, a country a third the size of Iran in population and wealth?

Perhaps today's Iranian authorities find the Bahais a good focus

for their genocidal fantasies precisely because this government wishes to make clear that it wants nothing to do with early hopes for a government religious in morality and democratic in method. Hang a few teen-age girls, and everyone will get the point: The rulers of Iran do not need to consult the Iranian people because they know what's best for Iran, whether Iranians like it or not — and, by the same token, they do not want a freely given moral consensus be-

cause they trust only coercion. Shiite Islam, the religion of the great majority of the Iranian people, puts a greater emphasis on reason than does any other form of Islam or do most other religions in the world. Then why the irony? Why do the current rulers of Iran, so desperately distrust reason?

Do they trust coercion more because they have secretly admitted to themselves that they are unable to change anyone's opinion through reasoned discussion? Or, do they really believe that reason — or, for that matter, any form of persuasion that can win meaningful assent to religious truth — operates only on people who live in the shadow of the hangman's noose?

The Islamic Republic of Iran — how neatly and thoroughly it has come to believe every part of its name.

It is hardly Iranian if it finds it necessary to hang 16 Bahais — in addition to the scores it has killed in recent years — merely for the "crime" of professing a religion that believes Iran to be a sacred land.

It is hardly a republic: A state that so terrifies and coerces its people is a republic in only some contorted sense of the word.

It is hardly Islamic in the spirit of the Koranic verse (10:99): "If it had been your Lord's will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?"

It is, in fact, hardly religious: it is difficult to imagine any tradition, motivated by the spirit of true religion, that would not cry: "Shame on those cowardly killers of defenseless people!"

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