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Renaissance in Tehran

Khomeini and Savonarola.

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By Banafsheh Zand-Bonazzi & Elio Bonazzi

The mass media routinely refers to Western values, such as tolerance and secularism, in contrast to the bigotry and fundamentalism typical of non-Western cultures, thereby generating the erroneous impression that if the West weren't always immune from religious zealotry, it certainly "solved" the issue in a distant past.

The Renaissance, for instance, is one of the crucial milestones of Western civilization, exercising a profound influence on cultural and intellectual life for centuries. While the Renaissance's achievements are common knowledge, not everybody knows, or remembers, that for several years Florence, the cultural center of the Renaissance, experienced a harsh period. Girolamo Savonarola, an influential preacher, managed to create a theocracy that bears similarities with Khomeini's Iran. Illustrious Renaissance figures, like the painter Botticelli, even bought into Savonarola's zeal; the former voluntarily burned many of his paintings in the belief that they were vain and pagan.

Savonarola, born in 1452, was a monk who hailed from an old family of Ferrara. In early 1482 he was sent by his superior to preach in Florence. His profound concern with the widespread depravity of the era established him as a powerful sermonizer at the peak of the Renaissance; he fervently lashed out at the immoral, pleasure-seeking life of the Florentines. The Medici family became his chosen target and he persistently disputed the morality of these generous patrons of the arts, culture, and the church. He blatantly attacked Lorenzo the Magnificent as the promoter of pagan art, of living frivolously, of ruling as Florence's tyrant.

He announced in prophetic terms the approaching judgment of God and the arrival of an "Avenger" who would reform Church life. The avenger was Charles VIII, king of France, who had entered Italy, and was advancing toward Florence. Savonarola's denunciation of the Medici produced its desired results: Lorenzo's son, Pietro de Medici, who was hated both for his tyranny and for his immoral life, was driven out of the city along with his family. Savonarola visited Charles in Pisa to cheer his imminent arrival in Florence. The king ushered in a new and peculiar constitution — a kind of theocratic democracy was established in Florence — based on the political and social doctrines set forth by Savonarola.

During this period, Savonarola founded a brotherhood for young people to encourage a pious, Christian lifestyle. On Sundays some of the members of this fraternity "cautioned" luxuriously dressed women to lay aside their frivolous ornaments. Thus, an actual

morality police was established; these lawmen were encouraged to spy on, denounce, and accuse.

But people soon turned on Savonarola. He was initially excommunicated, then hanged, and finally burned at the stake in May 1498. He would not, however, be the last "proselytizer" who was rejected by the very populace to whom he had brought powerful spiritual renewal.

Like Savonarola, Khomeini created a theocracy based on strictly religious political and social doctrines. Like Savonarola, Khomeini did not "interfere" directly in politics and affairs of state, but his teachings and ideas were absolutely authoritative. And like Savonarola, who tried without success to lead an international convention against the Borgia pope, Khomeini tried to bring together a convention of Islamic leaders to annihilate Israel and to spread his confrontational vision of Islam.

The *Basijis*, the "morals police" of the Islamic republic of Iran, target women who do not observe the religious dictates of veil and dress — exactly as Savonarola's young brotherhood did in Florence.

The list of similarities between Savonarola's and Khomeini's theocracies goes on, but we will stop here for the sake of brevity.

In the more recent past, Western civilization was finally able to exorcise religious fundamentalism, and now looks back at its worst moments with shame and contrition. Secularism brought us the notion of separation between Church and State.

The fact that in the last few years European powers have helped perpetuate the Islamic republic of Iran, thereby bestowing an aura of international legitimacy on Tehran in exchange for cheap oil, gas, and copper, betrays once again the old-time colonialist policy of allowing "the natives" to do as they wish amongst themselves so long as they do not threaten the interests of the empire.

Religious fundamentalism wouldn't be tolerated in any of the European nations. Any nation attempting the fundamentalist "experiment" would immediately become a pariah, and would be economically blackballed by the other European nations. When Joerg Haider, the controversial, extreme right-wing Austrian politician, formed a coalition government where his party would have had a few ministers, the 14 member states of the EU immediately cut off all bilateral contracts with Austria, forcing Haider to resign as secretary of the party.

It is likely that the same treatment would be reserved for European nations attempting to implement religious fundamentalist policies. But Iranians are not Europeans; they are the "natives" of a distant world, one subjugated to the economic interests of a still-colonialist Europe. So, instead of applying economic, diplomatic, and political pressure to Iran in order to force secularism, EU nations have preferred to maintain the status quo, thereby exploiting the situation to their own economic advantage.

The political justification used by the Europeans to condone their dealings with the mullahs relied on the illusion that the Islamic clerics would have been able to reform the theocratic regime. That illusion has been shattered by the extremely low turnout for the national elections on February 20, a result of an organized campaign — that began back in August — by Iranian activists to boycott them. The successful outcome of this maneuver has been to expose the smoke-and-mirrors devised by the mullahs to deceive the West. The boycott has undermined the Islamic republic, rather than just the hardliners or the reformists.

A model to explain social and economic dynamics in a period of decline was elaborated by Albert Hirshman in the 1970s. In his book, titled *Exit Voice and Loyalty*, he distinguishes between ways people react to deterioration in business firms and, in general, to dissatisfaction with organizations or governments. One way, the "Exit" strategy, consists of the member quitting the organization or for the customer to switch to the competing product; another is the "Voice" strategy, which is when members or customers to agitate and exert influence for change "from within"; and, lastly, there is the "Loyalty" strategy that retards Exit and permits Voice to play its proper role.

Applying Hirshman's categories to Iran, it is easy to see how loyalty raised the bar to exit and permitted voice (the failed reformist experiment started with the election of Khatami in 1997). There is no doubt that the record-low turnout in February is a clear message from Iranians of exit to the hated mullahs and the European powers to stop using the reformist farce to justify their lucrative oil, gas, and copper contracts.

In retrospect, it now appears evident that the so-called reformist experiment was nothing but a smokescreen carefully orchestrated by the mullahs to regain credibility after squads of professional killers sent by the former President Rafsanjani provoked serious diplomatic incidents in various European countries. The good-cop/bad-cop game was made possible by the appearance of Khatami on the Iranian political scene and played by the Iranian theocracy merely to assuage Western discontent.

The political landscape of the Islamic republic is characterized not by political parties or movements that fight over ideas and alternative policies but by "insiders" and "outsiders." The rewarding mechanism is the opposite of meritocracy and is based on common background, family connections, social class, and even geographical location. Insiders are a restricted oligarchy, which consists of a few, socially homogeneous groups. The typical insider has a modest education, grew up in certain neighborhoods of Tehran, and has good connections with the all-powerful *bazaaris* — the shop-owners of Tehran's bazaar — if not one of them. Colluding with the mullahs, they initially provided the financial backing needed for Khomeini's revolution. They were rewarded by the regime they helped install, by being allowed to amass incredible fortunes; today, they represent the backbone of support for the theocratic regime.

Outsiders don't stand a chance of ever becoming part of the restricted oligarchy that shares the real power. The barriers to entry to the insider group are insurmountable. Both reformists and hardliners are slightly different political manifestations of the same social

congregation, the insiders that contributed to the creation of the Islamic republic in 1978-79 and nowadays help the clerical regime navigate through perilous waters.

The power struggle in Iran was never between reformists and hardliners. The electoral victory of Khatami in 1997 represented a moment of collective delusion, a moment when the outsiders believed they could influence the political process. In reality, the real power struggle was fought behind the scenes and affected only a small fraction of the Iranian public. It was all about the redistribution of wealth among the insiders; for instance, to determine who would have occupied the most prestigious governmental posts (posts that, incidentally, make for the best sources of income thanks to the rampant corruption in Iran).

Another way to explain February's low electoral turnout is to consider the dangerous fracture between the overwhelming majority of outsiders, who have no chance to count, and insiders, who are now fighting for their survival. Outsiders couldn't care less for the 2,500 so-called reformist candidates prevented from running for office by the hardliners. Had people cared they could have shown their support by demonstrating in front of the parliament. Their apathy and disinterest was loud and clear.

The real outcome of the elections, with or without reformist candidates participating, would have not changed the real balance of power. The people of Iran clearly indicated that the real issue at stake, from now on, is not the reform of the regime — which is impossible — but its demise. In 2004 Tehran, which resembles 1498 Florence, the time of the "preachers" is coming to an end. We can only hope for a bloodless transition of power, where the criminally responsible are brought to justice and given a fair trial.

European powers are now left without any justification for continuing their support for the Islamic regime. It is likely that the mullahs will attempt to shift the focus of their negotiations with EU nations. Forget about real democracy and secularism, an open dialogue with theocratic Iran could still be perceived among Europeans as beneficial for themselves, who are eager to bring long-term stability to Afghanistan, to create a new regime in Iraq, and to keep the oil-rich Persian Gulf as tension-free as possible. But it will become increasingly difficult for European governments to sell any policy of support for an ugly regime to their own respective citizens, who have come to loathe Islamist fascism.

— *Banafsheh Zand-Bonazzi, a native of Iran, is an activist and writer. Elio Bonazzi is an Italian-born political scientist. Husband and wife, they are based in New York.*

Website: WWW.OYICM.ORG