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on the contradictions of contemporary Iran."

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THE
AYATOLLAH
BEGS TO DIFFER

THE PARADOX OF MODERN IRAN

H O O M A N
M A J D

with a new preface





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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface to the Anchor Books Edition xi

INTRODUCTION 1

PERSIAN CATS 21

THE AYATOLLAH HAS A COLD 51

IF IT'S TUESDAY, THIS MUST BE QOM 67

PRIDE AND HUMILITY 97

VICTORY OF BLOOD OVER THE SWORD 129

PAIRIDAEZA: THE PERSIAN GARDEN 160

THE AYATOLLAH BEGS TO DIFFER 192

FEAR OF A BLACK TURBAN 221

Notes 253

Index 261

Acknowledgments

I have based this book mostly on personal experience. In 2004 and 2005 I spent several weeks in Iran as a journalist, and in 2007 I spent almost two months living in Tehran, working on what was to become the manuscript. Both in Iran and in the United States, I have relied on my family, friends, and contacts as sources (as well as many other ordinary Iranians I have spoken to in Iran), some of whom I acknowledge in the text and others whose identities I have disguised for their own safety or who wish to remain anonymous. I have also served on a few occasions as an unpaid adviser to the Islamic Republic, bringing me into close contact with Presidents Khatami and Ahmadinejad and numerous members of their staffs, who have all contributed to my knowledge.

I am particularly grateful to President Mohammad Khatami, who took time out of his schedule, both during his presidency and afterward, to engage in long discussions with me and to answer my many questions, and to his brother (and chief of staff) Seyyed Ali Khatami, who spent even more time with me and who introduced me to many other influential Iranians, most of whom I continue to speak with on a regular basis. I learned more about the intricacies of the politics (and

the history) of the Islamic Republic from Ali Khatami than I could have from reading dozens of books, and he gave me invaluable lessons on the personalities of the characters who make up the ruling elite of Iran.

I am deeply indebted to the former UN ambassador Mohammad Javad Zarif for his keen insights (and his patience with me) and to the ambassadors Hossein Fereidoun, Sadeq Kharrazi, and Mehdi Danesh Yazdi, all of whom contributed to my understanding of the politics of the Islamic Republic. I'm also grateful to Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki for the time he set aside to meet with me on his visits to New York.

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Finally, I'd like to thank my editor, Kristine Puopolo, and my agent, Lindsay Edgecombe, and her colleague James Levine for their hard work in making this a readable book. And, of course, thanks to my father, Nasser Majd, and my mother, Mansoureh Assar, for what they've taught me; and to Karri Jenkins, Davitt Sigerson, Michael Zilkha, Selim Zilkha, Simon Van Booy, Daniel Feder, Eddie Stern, Michael Halsband, Paul Werner, Suzy Hansen, Roger Trilling, Glenn O'Brien, and Ken Browar.

On June 12, 2009, Iran held a presidential election, one that was to be a referendum on four years of President Ahmadinejad's rule. The results stunned most observers, as they almost always do in Iranian elections, but importantly, this time they stunned Iranians, too, leading to street protests, a brutal crackdown by the government, and the deaths of ordinary Iranians who were not protesting their system of government, but the way in which they believed the election had been stolen. I was once again in Iran in the weeks before the elections, and my observations of Iran's Islamic democracy, one which I partly describe in this book as leading to the surprise but fair election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, reinforced my belief that changes, social and political, are under way in Iran. But it is important to understand that those changes, and they are uniquely Iranian changes, not imposed or borrowed Western ones, will not fundamentally alter the character of either the state or the people, both of which I describe in the chapters to follow.

On May 23, 2009, I was at Tehran's Azadi Indoor Stadium, twenty days before the fateful presidential election. I, and the NBC News team I was with, had difficulty getting in the gates; "all full," the guards kept

telling us. And full it was, overflowing in fact, for the kick-off rally of the Mir Hossein Mousavi campaign. Mousavi, a onetime prime minister and part of the old guard of revolutionaries, who had transformed himself into a reformer, wasn't even going to be there; he was in Esfahan, "breaking the ice" in that city, they said. The rally featured former President Khatami and Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, and the eager crowd—young, old, and in between—numbered over twenty thousand. I couldn't make my way to the VIP section, let alone the V-VIP section, and I didn't want to. I was happy to be crushed among the thousands of cheering, ecstatic even, Iranians who gave birth to the "green wave," the support the campaign was counting on to wrest the presidency away from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

It was not supposed to end the way it did. After all, what ensued is why Mohammad Khatami, the only early favorite to defeat Ahmadinejad at the polls on June 12, dropped out of the presidential race. That's what Iranians all assumed, all of those who were in Iran in the weeks and days leading up to the earthquake that was Iran's elections. Khatami would never be allowed to win, they seemed to understand. *Kayhan*, Iran's conservative daily and the Supreme Leader's mouthpiece, said as much, even threatening him in a thinly veiled editorial with assassination. Iran was theirs now, they were saying, and Khatami posed the biggest threat to their ownership. That's Iran for you—Islamic democracy, in all of its glorious contradictions.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, Iranians thought, posed no such threat to the conservatives—the landlords, let's call them—but his chances of winning weren't exactly good, even as recently as six weeks before the election. "If the turnout is in the twenty-five million range, we will be guests of Mr. Ahmadinejad's for another four years." That was Sadeq Kharrazi, former Iranian ambassador to Paris, deputy foreign minister, member of the nuclear negotiating team under Khatami, and one of the more influential reformists who also has close ties to the Supreme Leader, speaking at the end of April. It was another late-night salon at his house, like the other salons I describe, filled with photos of him-

self with Ayatollah Khamenei. “Ahmadinejad has ten to twelve million votes,” he said, a number echoed by virtually everyone I spoke to in Tehran then; in Yazd, Esfahan, and Qom, too, “and he’ll win if the turnout is low.” He wasn’t being pessimistic—just realistic.

The Mousavi campaign’s early strategy, one of getting out the vote to counter Ahmadinejad’s solid base, raised no eyebrows, but it began to pay dividends, and a fever for the democratic process started to afflict many up-till-then apathetic Iranians. “If the majority doesn’t vote, the minority rules,” proclaimed one billboard, rather more poetically in Persian, that I saw all over Tehran at the end of May. Ayatollah Rafsanjani, known as the second most powerful man in Iran, had paid for that one, his image next to the words. If the fever held, there would be enough votes to force a second-round runoff. Mousavi was going to win any runoff, and win big. Ahmadinejad might have his ten to twelve million, but he couldn’t possibly defeat Mousavi if Mehdi Karroubi’s and Mohsen Rezaei’s supporters (the other two opposition candidates in the race) coalesced around him, too. It wasn’t as if Ahmadinejad’s campaign didn’t know this. Their strategy from the start had been to win outright in the first round (and *Kahyan*, curiously prescient, predicted his margin of victory to within a point or two), but his campaign was anemic compared to Mousavi’s, which grew stronger by the rally, with the ever popular Khatami front and center much of the time. I almost went with Khatami to Ahvaz, on May 30, when the plane he was to have caught back to Tehran was discovered to have a bomb aboard. The landlords weren’t whispering anymore. This was shaping up to be an epic battle between them and the reformers, one they had never really seriously fought before; between those who believed Iran should finally move into its post-revolutionary phase and those who insisted it remain forever a revolutionary state. “If it’s over thirty million,” we win, Khatami had said to me in mid-May, announcing what the turnout had to be, but still hesitant to declare that the battle would be won. “Are you staying for the election?” he asked me, right before the Ahvaz jaunt. “No, but I’ll come back for the second round,”

I told him. “There won’t be a second round; we will win outright on June 12.” Strong words coming from a cautious man two weeks before the election, a man who didn’t believe he himself was going to win his landslide in 1997 until days before the vote.

And based on what I had seen in Iran over the last month, maybe Khatami was right, I thought. I had tried to find where Ahmadinejad’s support was going to come from if he was going to add to his base to defeat three challengers who were all gaining popularity. Outside of Tehran? No, whether on the road, in truck stops, cafés, or in other cities, I saw more enthusiasm for the opposition than for the president, which surprised me. Even in South Tehran, his supposed base in the capital, I found Ahmadinejad detractors, four years after the district had come out for him in big numbers. Not that Ahmadinejad didn’t have supporters everywhere; it was just that they seemed to be the apathetic ones this time. Perhaps that’s the lot of an incumbent candidate steering the ship of a discontented nation. And maybe that’s why the twenty-four million or so mythical Iranians, who braved long lines, thunderstorms, and 113-degree temperatures to vote for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, didn’t celebrate on the streets when their man won his landslide. Nor did some of the ten to twelve million who probably *did* vote for him come out to cheer, not until they were asked to, two days later. And even then, the photos of his victory rally were clumsily photoshopped by Ahmadinejad’s experts, probably the same ones who gave us four rather than three missiles in an earlier propaganda show, to illustrate a sea of Iranians-for Ahmadinejad where there was only a pond.

Over forty million voted in Iran’s presidential election, 63 percent for the sitting president, according to his own Interior Ministry. It took a day or so, but that’s when it struck dismayed Iranians: of course, they never were going to let *anyone* but Ahmadinejad win. That’s why his campaign was anemic, that’s why he didn’t seem to care that his challengers were gaining on him, and that’s why he was so arrogant in the aftermath. This had never happened before. Iranian elections had been

generally fair up until 2009. You can't, as the Supreme Leader said at Friday prayers a week later, still endorsing his man, forge eleven million votes. One hundred thousand, maybe half a million, maybe a million, but not *eleven* million ballots! (With his admission of a million, the Supreme Leader sounded more pessimistic about Iran's democracy than even Khatami, who had once told me that the most an election could be cheated by was between three hundred thousand and five hundred thousand stray votes.) But what Ayatollah Ali Khamenei failed to concede at his sermon was that the only way to cheat by eleven million votes was to never count them in the first place, or to just make up the numbers regardless of what they really were. Could that have happened? Perhaps, but we'll never know.

Thirty years have passed since the revolution, exactly thirty years, and Iranians weren't mad that Ahmadinejad won reelection on June 12. They were and are still mad that the one thing, the one true element of democracy they had—their vote—had seemingly become meaningless. Stop looking at Tehran, the government kept saying to all, you're misreading the country. You in the West don't understand Iran, it pleaded; you don't know that Ahmadinejad really *did* have all the support of the country. It's only the Tehran Westernized elite who are unhappy, and the West and Zionists (always the Zionists) are stirring things up. I write about these Westernized elites, and about how distant they are from the vast majority of Iranians in the pages that follow. But this time there was Shiraz, Esfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz, and all the other places we know people didn't believe their government, where people *died* because they didn't believe the government's vote count. Many of them were ordinary Iranians, the kinds of Iranians who have no issue with their system of government, no, they're *happy* with their system of government, the kinds of Iranians that are portrayed throughout this book. These Iranians didn't start by protesting the regime, the "nezam" as the Supreme Leader called it; they weren't protesting anything but their right to their vote, a right that has always been sacred in the Islamic Republic. And Mir Hossein Mousavi wasn't

waging a campaign to bring down the *nezam*. He only wanted to be a better president than Ahmadinejad, to ensure the progress of the Islamic Republic, and that wasn't and isn't a crime in the Islamic Republic, as he was quick to point out.

What started out as an outpouring of anger has turned into a battle royal for the soul of a nation. Or a battle to allow the nation a soul. It is a delicious irony that Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, a founder of the *nezam*, a man Iranians couldn't bring themselves to vote for the last time, would be on the protestors' side, that he would be instrumental in the push to allow Iranians their rights. And who would have thought that Ali Larijani, Speaker of Parliament, obedient son of the revolution, and close confidant of the Supreme Leader, would suggest, in contradiction of his mentor, that the Guardian Council, those who are supposed to be checking the vote, had erred? Iran's leadership cracked in June 2009, but didn't break. These leaders surface throughout my book, and their characters are today as they were when I first described them.

It's impossible to predict the outcome of the Iranian crisis at the time of writing. The protests may be quashed, life in Iran may return to something resembling normal. (Indeed, it is fairly normal in most places, even in many parts of Tehran.) The faction that supports the Supreme Leader and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad still has a large portion of the population behind it, the ten to twelve million, maybe more, plus all the guns. (If the West, or Iranians in opposition movements abroad, try to hijack the protests for their own causes, they'll have more, much, much, more.) And Mousavi, the unlikely hero of Iran's reform movement, may or may not continue the fight, but Iranians will, in their own quiet way. Khatami, Rafsanjani, and the other clerics who believe in reform and an Islamic democracy will also fight, whether overtly and publicly or from within the system, a system they are all a part of, after all. At a press conference before the elections, one Mousavi campaign manager was asked about the brutality of *his nezam*, way back, when he was prime minister in the eighties, a post since abol-

ished. The staffer answered, “We were all Ahmadinejads then.” He was right, as this book highlights. The question still remains whether Iranians want to all be Mousavis, Khatamis, or Rafsanjanis now.

Hooman Majd,
June 2009



INTRODUCTION

“Yeki-bood; yeki-nabood.” That’s how all Iranian stories, at least in the oral tradition, have begun, since as long as anyone remembers. “There was one; there wasn’t one,” as in “There was a person (once upon a time); but on the other hand, no, there was no one.” Often, the saying continues with *“Gheir az Khoda, beech-kee nabood,”* or “Other than God, there was no One,” a uniquely Persian obfuscation of the Muslim Arabic *“La’illa ha il’allah”* (There is no God but Allah), and which one might think makes much less sense than the original, but is in a way perfectly reasonable. Introduce a young mind to the paradoxes of life with a paradox, you see, which is what most of the Iranian folk stories are about in the first place. As a child, I heard those stories alongside English equivalents (which of course began with the seemingly far more sensible “Once upon a time”), but it never occurred to me then that the simple *“Yeki-bood; yeki-nabood”* said so much about the inherited culture that so deeply penetrated my otherwise Western life.

“Yeki-bood; yeki-nabood.” Yes, we are about to hear a fantasy, but wait—is it a fantasy? While most Iranian stories that begin so are indeed fantasies, the fantastic Shia stories of early Islam are thought to be true history by the legions of believers in the faith, and if evoked, *“Yeki-bood”*

wraps itself in religious significance as well as the Persian art of the epic. On one of my trips to Iran, to Qom to be precise, I picked up some CDs of *nobeh*, Shia religious incantations, usually sung to huge crowds on religious holidays, that tell the stories of Shia saints and their martyrdom. One CD contained a rather mellifluous version of the story of Fatimeh Zahra and Ali (the daughter and son-in-law of the Prophet) that began with “*Yeki-bood; yeki-nabood*” and continued with “*zeer-e gonbad’e kabood*,” or “under the bruised [or dark] dome [or sky],” alluding not just to the Islamic roots of “There was one, there wasn’t one” but also to the Shia sense of the world as a dark and oppressive place. The singer claimed the tale to be one of “estrangement and woe,” central themes in Shiism. There is no God but God, there was one and there wasn’t one, other than God there was no One, and the world is under a perpetual dark cloud. Welcome to Shia Iran.

Iran is better known today by the outside world than at almost any time in its history, certainly since the fall of the Persian Empire, mostly because of the Islamic Revolution, which to many ushered in an era of successful but much-feared Islamic fundamentalism. As a child, I had to patiently explain to new friends in school where and exactly what Iran was, if they even bothered to inquire about my strange name; today I suspect that young Iranians have no such problems. When I look back now, both in my childhood and even as a young adult, I couldn’t have imagined my country as anything more than a second-rate Third World nation subservient to Western powers: had someone seriously suggested to me, or any other Iranian for that matter, that the United States would one day be proposing to build a missile defense system in Europe to guard against an attack by *Iran* (as the United States has, to the great consternation of the Russians), with *Iranian*-made missiles, I would have instantly labeled that person as stark raving mad. Despite the negative connotations of a perceptibly hostile Iran, Iranians of a

certain age can be forgiven for feeling a tinge of pride in their nation's rapid ascent to a position of being taken seriously by the world's greatest superpower, and all in just a little over a quarter of a century. One might argue whether Iran and Iranians would have been better off without the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but it is indisputable that had it not happened, Iran today would likely not have much of a say in global affairs.

Rightly or wrongly, the revolution and the path the nation took after its success have led to Iran's prominence and repute, but of course at the time Iranians could hardly have known that their revolt would have such far-reaching consequences and effects. For two or three hundred years Iran had been, in all but name, a proxy of Western powers—specifically Britain and then the United States when it took over the mantle of empire after World War II. Iranians overthrew a twenty-five-hundred-year monarchy in 1979 to liberate themselves from an autocratic dictator as much as to liberate themselves from foreign domination (a factor that most in the West did not understand at the time and that was also partly the motivation for the takeover of the U.S. Embassy), and for almost thirty years now, whatever can be said about Iran, it cannot be said that it is subservient to any greater power.

In the early summer of 1979, only a few months after the Islamic Revolution had liberated me from having to explain to geographically and politically challenged fellow students where I was from, I found myself at Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park, shouting until I was hoarse. I had recently finished my college studies and was visiting friends and family in London, and as I stood on the lawn surrounded by a very emotional crowd of recent Iranian exiles—many of whom had been forced, at least so they thought, to flee in recent months—I vehemently defended the Islamic Republic. I surprised myself: as a secular and thoroughly Westernized Iranian (or *gharb-zadeh*—"West-toxified" in the rev-

olutionary lexicon), the nascent Islamic Republic should hardly have been my cup of tea, but I didn't find it hard, nor did I see any contradiction in it, to celebrate an Iran that, after years of subjugation to outside powers, finally had a political system it could call its own. That was certainly good enough for me. As a twenty-two-year-old who until recently had had very little idea of Iran's place in the world, I'll admit that my newfound political awareness of the country of my birth was heavily tinged with youthful idealism, mixed with a good measure of latent Persian pride. The English who looked on curiously at the screaming wogs (as I, along with anyone darker than ruddy, used to be called at my English public school, a school that boasted Milton as an alumnus) seemed bemused; a few shook their heads in disapproval. At least, I thought, now they know where Iran is, a country where *they* will no longer have a say.

I tell this anecdote because I often see Westerners react to Iran with a sense of bafflement. But that moment at Speakers' Corner and the seeming absurdity of my brief defense of Khomeini's Islamic Republic bring to light a paradox about Iran that is still conspicuous today. Many of my Iranian friends have had these moments, and perhaps the most surprising comes from my Jewish-Iranian friend Fuad. A few years after the revolution, in Los Angeles, I had dinner with Fuad and his wife, Nasreen, where he told me a story that called to mind my Speakers' Corner experience of 1979. He had recently arrived in L.A. from Tel Aviv, where he first sought asylum after leaving Iran, and he was recounting the days preceding the revolution in Tehran. He told me that on one of the nights when millions of Tehran residents protested the Shah's government by taking to rooftops on Khomeini's instruction and shouting, "الله أكبر - الله أكبر - الله أكبر!" Fuad and his family found themselves up on their rooftop shouting the same words as forcefully as their Muslim compatriots. Even after leaving his homeland, after settling first in its archenemy Israel and then moving to Los Angeles, even while we were getting drunk on scotch and savoring Nasreen's kosher cooking, neither he nor I saw any contradiction in either his initial sanguine

view of an Islamic Revolution or his chanting, at the time, the most Islamic of Muslim sayings.

Fuad's parents had fled Baghdad in the 1930s during a wave of pogroms and institutionalized anti-Semitism, when many Iraqi Jews made their way to neighboring Iran, settling in a country that had boasted a large and vibrant Persian Jewish community for millennia. But Fuad didn't feel in the least Iraqi, and despite his extended stays in Israel (where he also attended college before the revolution and where he learned his fluent Hebrew), he didn't feel Israeli; he felt *Iranian*. And as an Iranian, he was with his countrymen when they rose up against the Shah. Islam, particularly Shia Islam, was as familiar to him as it was to his many Muslim friends; he understood that it formed their character as much as anything else did, and although he didn't participate in the rites of Shiism, he and his family were comfortable with the culture that surrounded them, a culture that, although steeped in the Shia tradition (which has borrowed from Iran's pre-Islamic culture), was as much theirs as their fellow Iranians'.

In order to understand Iran and Iranians today, one needs to understand what it meant to shout "*Allah-hu-Akbar!*" in 1979. The expression has become known as a sort of Muslim fundamentalist battle cry, uttered in every Hollywood movie featuring terrorists and notorious as the famous last words of the 9/11 hijackers. But the "God is Great!" that Iranians shouted in 1979 predated the concepts we have of fundamentalism—there was no Hezbollah, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad then, nor an Al Qaeda or a Taliban (and the PLO, the Middle East's most prominent terrorists, was still famously secular, and very few in the West had even heard of the Muslim Brotherhood, let alone knew what it stood for)—and to the Shia people the words signified their fearlessness in confronting an unjust ruler.

When the revolution came, I greeted it with fascination. Only a

few years earlier, I had believed that the Shah was all-powerful, and now he was improbably on his way out. I disagreed with other Iranian students in the United States, both monarchists and revolutionaries, who thought that Jimmy Carter was pulling all the strings in Iran; my American side liked Carter, who seemed to me a truly decent man in the White House, and I believed that he was caught unawares by the Khomeini-led movement, mainly because I believed in his naïveté. But Iranians hated him: the few remaining monarchists, because they felt the United States had intentionally abandoned the Shah; the revolutionaries, communists, Islamists, and everyone else, because he had not forcefully spoken out against the Shah (and had even toasted him at a New Year's party in 1978 in Iran) and was perhaps even conspiring to reinstall him, much as Eisenhower had done in 1953.

When I, along with countless Iranians at home and abroad, voted in the yes-or-no ballot following the Shah's downfall, we overwhelmingly chose an Islamic Republic. Islam had won the revolution; even the traditional and secular left-wing opponents of the Shah's regime had recognized that without Islam, without "*Allah-hu-Akbar!*," the revolution would not have been possible. Iranians still very much believed that to the victor go the spoils, and the mosques (and Khomeini in particular) were the victors in a battle that almost all Iranians were involved in. Iran was an Islamic country, a *Shia* country, and now, because the very concept of the Islamic Republic was a purely Iranian and Shia one, for the first time in hundreds, if not thousands, of years, Iranians were defining their own political system and, more important, their own destiny.

This memory rang in my head when I was in Tehran in the days after Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 and as I tried to understand how he had become president. *Everyone* openly talked about politics, and I understood from the many unlikely people who had voted for him, along with the millions that make up Iran's underclass, that he had success-

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