

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Prime Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh?

Iran's liberals try to stay ahead of a growing anti-clergy sentiment. The regime's survival is at stake.

For the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, demonstrations and even near-insurrections have taken place in several Iranian cities by a coalition of Iranian forces who oppose the dictatorial rule of the Iranian clergy.

In Tabriz, Iran's second largest city, as well as in Teheran, Qom, Mashad, and Isfahan, Iranians have taken to the streets with slogans such as: "Death to Beheshti! Death to Rafsanjani! Death to Khamenei!" The three clergymen named are the leaders of the ruling Islamic Republican Party (IRP), the clergy-dominated gang that controls the Iranian government.

According to Teheran sources, the outbreak of discontent, which had long been simmering under the surface, was catalyzed by the ongoing war with Iraq. The success of Iraq in blocking Iranian oil exports and reducing to a trickle imports of food and fuel to Iran's chief cities has exacerbated the unrest.

Most essential commodities are now rationed in Teheran and other centers. Food, water, and heating oil, along with gasoline, are under strict controls, and in many cases there are outright shortages.

In the context of the crisis in Iran, a clique of secular politicians in Iran, including the president of the country, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, former Foreign Ministers Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and Ibrahim Yazdi, and ex-Prime Minister Meh-

di Bazargan, have begun a carefully calculated power play.

Long in eclipse since the start of the hostage affair in Iran, this faction has started anew to challenge the mullahs by capitalizing on the widespread discontent.

Last month, for instance, Bani-Sadr wrote a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini demanding that Prime Minister Mohammed Ali Rajai of the IRP be forced to resign.

"The presence of the current government is more disastrous than a war," said Bani-Sadr's letter. "This government is not worthy of the situation, and the fate of the country should not be left to those who do not have the slightest knowledge about the country's position and whose capabilities are minimal."

At the same time, this week Bani-Sadr accused the IRP of condoning torture of political prisoners, a very sensitive charge in Iran, and the scandal forced the resignation of Ayatollah Khalkhali as chief drug enforcer. Khalkhali, who heads the Fedayeen-e Islam, the Iranian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has earned a reputation as a sado-masochistic killer.

According to Iranian sources, in demanding Rajai's resignation, Bani-Sadr is trying a power play to install Ghotbzadeh as premier.

In this effort, Bani-Sadr and Co. are receiving international backing from the apparatus of the Socialist International of Willy Brandt and

Olof Palme, according to intelligence sources. Part of the support is also coming from Arab League circles associated with Algeria, Libya, and Arab League United Nations envoy Clovis Maksoud.

To undercut the power of the mullahs, Ghotbzadeh is reportedly threatening to expose connections between key members of the Iranian clergy, such as Ayatollah Beheshti, and the old Savak apparatus, the Shah's secret police.

In postrevolutionary Iran, this is a standard threat. Most of the leading mullahs did, in fact, work with Savak. After the revolution, Yazdi and Ayatollah Lahouti, both allies of Bani-Sadr, took over the Savak headquarters and seized possession of the many Savak files. In addition, Yazdi's son-in-law, who headed the Iranian embassy in Washington, handed Yazdi the secret files of that office. It is those files that Ghotbzadeh is threatening to reveal.

Lahouti and another Bani-Sadr aide, Ahmed Salamatian, are touring Iran's outlying districts to rally anti-mullah circles to support them.

Hossein Khomeini, grandson of the ayatollah, in turn, blasted Bani-Sadr: "Today, those who had gathered under the umbrella of Mr. Bani-Sadr want to start acting against the imam. They have made grave errors. The friends of Mr. Bani-Sadr are falling away. The clerical figures who had supported him repent today. . . . There is a big conspiracy against the imam." At least one analyst, Prof. Richard Falk of Princeton University, is already predicting civil war.

The real question is: can Bani-Sadr and Ghotbzadeh contain the ferment, or will it sweep away the Islamic Republic altogether?