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Elite factionalism, as an integral part of the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), has been a major obstacle to the consolidation of the regime which took over after the overthrow of the imperial regime (*nezam-e shahanshahi*) in February 1979. From 1987 on, elite factionalism in the IRI has reached new heights and an open political crisis. While the new developments caused the factions to move openly against each other, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini also decided to intervene actively in order to bring the situation under control. Ayatollah Khomeini's active role, in his capacity as *marja'-e taqlid* (source of emulation) and more importantly the supreme religious leader (*vai-ye faqih*), clearly was an effort on his part to control the crisis. The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to identify the factions and their principal advocates; second, to examine the significance of Ayatollah Khomeini's active role *vis-à-vis* the factions and the IRI's future; and, third, to clarify the role played by the supreme religious leader, a position held by Ayatollah Khomeini until June 1989 in the IRI internal politics.

Ayatollah Khomeini had preferred to remain aloof from conflicts of the elites prior to 1987 and interfered only on rare occasions when the situation was about to get out of hand. But in 1987, he chose to enter actively the scene of the power struggle without any apparent previous political demand. First, he intervened to give the final consent to the abolition of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP) which had become a major source of clashes between the IRI ruling factions. Second, he started to issue decrees on social, political and economic issues which had remained unresolved throughout the life of the IRI. In this context, he even chose directly and openly to attack the president of the IRI regarding the latter's views on the role of the Islamic state.

Two new developments were at the core of 1987-89 factional conflict in the IRI. First, the differences between the factions reached an explosive stage. The factions were finding it increasingly necessary to turn to Ayatollah Khomeini to resolve complex as well as simple problems. These differences were directly related to the future social path of the IRI. Second, there was Khomeini's new active role in trying to resolve the differences and thus close the factional gap. Both these two factors were directly related to the future of the IRI without the Ayatollah.

The cease-fire in the Iran-Iraq war on August 1988 added a new dimension to, and intensified, factional conflicts. The end of the war introduced, or rather injected, IRI's foreign policy as an important source of clashes between the factions. The issue of IRI's foreign policy was not a source of direct factional confrontation in the years immediately preceding the cease-fire. During this period, say 1981 to 1988, the foreign policy of the IRI was heavily influenced by the war factor. This is to say that because

of priorities given to the war efforts of the IRI and especially because of Ayatollah Khomeini's insistence on these priorities, foreign policy remained, for the most part, outside factional struggles. However, the sudden end of the war changed the situation rapidly and made foreign policy important in these struggles. This development caused the appearance of a 'third faction' in the IRI politics which is also to be examined.

IRI AND ELITE FACTIONALISM

Elite factionalism has been a reality of the IRI's political existence ever since its birth. Initially, there was the Provisional Government faction headed by Mehdi Bazargan against the Revolutionary Council dominated by the IRP and personalities such as Ayatollah Mohammad Hosein Beheshti (Feb. 1979-Nov. 1979). With the elimination of the Provisional Government, following the American Hostage Crisis, the factions changed to include the office of President headed by Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr against the clergy-dominated IRP or the *maktabi* committed and doctrinaire (Dec. 1979-June 1981). During this period, the ruling organs found a more definite shape under the IRI constitution. This period ended with the dismissal of Bani-Sadr and the total hegemony of the IRP, following the June 1981 crisis. After the elimination of what were then called the Islamic 'liberals' (Bani-Sadr, Bazargan, etc.) from the political scene, differences began to emerge within the *maktabi* ranks. Gradually, two factions began to take shape which differed sharply on a variety of social, political, economic and religious issues. These issues included the future strategic economic path of the IRI, the interpretation of the religious laws, the foreign policy of the IRI, the enforcement of Islamic laws and the role of the Islamic state. This was how the then speaker of the Majles, Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, described the stand of the two factions in 1980: 'In Iran . . . two relatively strong factions exist. One supports the nationalization of most industries while the other supports the private sector.'¹ Here, Rafsanjani exposed the differences between the two factions on one very important issue only, namely the economic. Yet, the two factions, which may be called the statist-reformist (pro-state role) and the conservatives (pro-private sector) exist in other spheres as well. The reformists had majority control in the *Majles* (parliament) and the Cabinet; they also controlled the daily *Jomhuri-ye Islami*. The conservatives enjoyed control of the Guardian Council (*Shura-ye negahban*);² they had minority support in the *Majles* and controlled the daily *Resalat*. The clashes between the *Resalat* and *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, showed the two factions' interpretation of the religious laws. Thus, there has emerged the advocates of 'Progressive Religious Laws' (*feqh-e puya*) and 'Traditional Religious Laws' (*feqh-e sonnati*). Personalities such as Ayatollah Azari-Omi, President Ali Khameneh'i and Ayatollah Imami-Kashani (spokesman of the Guardian Council) were among the advocates of the conservative faction. The social base of the conservative faction has basically been the traditional bazaar capitalists and high-ranking clergy who do not believe in a strict interpretation of 'the Rule of the Jurisprudent' (*velayat-e faqih*). The reformist faction, as we shall

see later, has had a more complex posture. At this stage (i.e. between 1981 and 1987), personalities such as Rafsanjani and Ali Akbar Velayati (Foreign Minister), were in a coalition with more extremist (or 'radical')³ figures in forming the statist-reformist faction. These personalities were Mir-Hosein Mosavi (Prime Minister until 1989), Hojjat al-Islam Khomeinina (Prosecutor General until 1989), Hadi Ghaffari (Majles member) and Ali Akbar Mohashami (Minister of Interior until 1989).

Aside from paralyzing the IRP, the differences between the two factions turned violent in some instances. The elimination of the Hashemi group following the 'Irangate' affair was one such instance.⁴ In the legal sphere, the differences between the *Majles* and the Guardian Council were the most evident example of the existence of the two factions. Due to these differences, such fundamental national issues as the land policy of the IRI and the nationalization of the foreign trade (which is required by a constitutional article) have remained unsolved. Therefore two definite factions began to take shape as a result of polarization in the *maktabi* ranks after the 1981 crisis. These two ruling factions had some common characteristics. They both refused to declare their existence openly and preferred to organize and exist 'covertly'. They both showed themselves submissive to Ayatollah Khomeini's authority and retreated when faced with it. They were both considered ruling factions of the IRI and each controlled some ruling organs. On every issue, each faction had a policy which sometimes sharply differed from the other. Most of the differences centered around domestic issues (especially economic issues, although foreign policy was injected into the political scene following the Iran-Iraq cease-fire). Another important common characteristic of these two factions was that they did not function as political parties, but rather as loose coalitions.

There were also at least two more fully developed factions which existed outside the two ruling factions. These were: the Freedom Movement (*nehzat-e azadi*), headed by the former prime minister, Bazargan and some of his National Front allies; and second, the movement shaped around some top Grand Ayatollahs who opposed the notion of the Rule of the Jurisprudent which is an inseparable component of the IRI's existence. This faction also opposed such IRI policies as the war and economic policies. A personality such as the Grand Ayatollah Qomi, who was under virtual house arrest in the city of *Mashhad*, belonged to this group.⁵ These two factions functioned as semi-legal entities by issuing proclamations and decrees but they were under constant harassment by the ruling factions. The recent developments in the IRI did not directly concern these two. They will therefore, not be a focus of this paper, but, in the event of major future changes, they will probably play some role.

Ayatollah Khomeini's stand toward elite factionalism in the IRI was always non-interference until the last moment. He refused to accept Bazargan's resignation until the American Hostage Crisis developed. He refused to move against Bani-Sadr's presidency until the June 1981 crisis. On the issue of factionalism, Rafsanjani suggested that Ayatollah Khomeini wished the two factions to adopt a 'critical stand' but not to

clash with or 'weaken each other'. Such was Ayatollah Khomeini's stand on the two factions until 1987. Since it was his policy to interfere only when the time was ripe (and he was usually the judge of the timing), it seems that his direct interference during 1988-89 was a signal of the worsening crisis, and factional fighting and therefore the right moment for direct interference.

THE ABOLITION OF IRP

On 2 May 1987, the daily *Jomhuri-ye Islami* dropped the phrase 'the organ of the Islamic Republic Party' from its name and declared Ayatollah Khomeini's consent to the joint proposal of Rafsanjani and Ali Khameneh'i (then IRI president and now the Supreme Leader) regarding the abolition of the IRP. Following this, the already inactive offices of the IRP closed down all over the country. Thus, the IRI joined the very few countries in the world who do not have political parties.

The abolition of the IRP was significant because of the Party's important role in securing, for the IRI, total control of political power. The Party was instrumental in defeating the Islamic 'liberals' in their struggle against the *maktabis* and played an important role in the violent repression of the opposition. The IRP was established only ten days after the collapse of the Imperial Regime, by a proposal put forward by Ayatollah Khomeini. The five men put in charge of establishing the Party were members of the Revolutionary Council. They were: Rafsanjani, Khameneh'i, Javad Bahonar, Musavi-Ardabili and Beheshiti. The main task of the Party was to rally all the supporters of the 'Rule of the Jurisprudent' around one organization and under the guidance of the clergy.⁶ From the very beginning, the IRP leaders were people from the top ranks of the new state. Emerging from the Revolutionary Council, this leadership was able to put its people in charge of important posts. Thus, from the very beginning such organs as the *pasdaran* (Islamic Revolutionary Guards), *basis* (the Volunteers Corp), *Masazafan* Foundation and the Majles as well as the Islamic Societies (grass-roots Islamic organs loyal to the IRP) throughout the country came under IRP's control. The IRP was therefore able to resist, influence and sabotage Bazargan's Government by building a state apparatus parallel to what remained of the old regime's apparatus which were controlled by the Bazargan Cabinet. Thus, while Bazargan's Government controlled the ministries, the police and the army, the IRP controlled the Revolutionary Council, the *komitah* (Islamic security committee) and the *pasdaran*. The IRP was also able to challenge, attack and destroy its opposition with a free hand and through 'non-legal' methods, since officially it was not the ruling party. The *hezbollahi*, which attacked demonstrations and offices of political organizations and newspapers, was associated with the IRP.⁷

Internally, the IRP consisted of many groups which, although they were all in favor of the 'Rule of the Jurisprudent', had their own differences and distinctive backgrounds. These groups, which shared the political leadership of the IRP, were as follows:

- (1) A part of the clergy (*rohanian*) who had an anti-Shah political background and were loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini during the Revolution.
- (2) The bazaari merchant supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. Due to their economic power and their close relations to Ayatollah Khomeini, their strength grew rapidly in the IRP.
- (3) Some individuals who had alleged by associated with the conservative *Hojjatiah* Society such as Ali Akbar Parvarash and Ali Akbar Velayati. Velayati has always denied any such association.
- (4) Some supporters of Dr Mozafar Baqa'i (the rightist head of the Toilers Party who supported the 1953 coup) such as Hasan Ayat and Ahmad Kashani.
- (5) Individuals who had previously belonged to religious groups and had some followers. Of these, Jalaloddin Farsi, Abbas Poshibani, Mir-Hosein Musavi may be mentioned.⁸

These groups kept their ranks close while the IRP was engaged in challenging and eliminating the opposition. But with the June 1981 crisis, the elimination of Bani-Sadr, the evaporation of the remaining democratic freedoms and the setbacks and defeats dealt at the opposition, the situation began to change for the IRP. From summer of 1981 on, the IRP became the only legal political party and the sole ruler of the state. Yet this was also the beginning of the end for the IRP. With the elimination of the Bani-Sadr group and the reduction of opposition's danger, a process of polarization started in the IRP.

The polarization occurred with a separation between the bazaari faction on one side and the more technocratic and petty-bourgeois factions on the other. This was the beginning of formation of the reformist and conservative factions. The factional infighting appeared on a variety of issues from 1982 to 1987. Motions in the Majles to oust Prime Minister Musavi's Cabinet represented the conservative faction's activities, and the cabinet purges which resulted in the weakening of the conservative supporters, represented the reformist faction's activities (the dismissal of Habibollah Asgaroladi in 1983 is a good example of this). The IRP leadership also took sides in this conflict. Thus, Khameneh'i, the IRP's first secretary, took the side of the conservatives and Rafsanjani⁹ and Ardabili allied themselves with the other faction. The IRP congress (1983), which was supposed to reduce the tensions, only added fuel to it. The outcome of the Congress and the election of the new members of the new council of leadership showed that the conservative faction had consolidated its position within the party.¹⁰ In fact, from this point on, the only factor that saved the reformist faction from total and overwhelming defeat was Ayatollah Khomeini's support. His support for the Musavi Cabinet - as the most evident manifestation of the reformist faction - was the major factor in saving it when a group of conservative Majles members tried to oust the Cabinet (September 1986).

Conservative control of the IRP was met by strong resistance from the other faction. The rivalry between the two was so strong that by

1986-1987, the IRP was unable to function as a political party. Although the paralyzing effect of this rivalry was one reason behind the abolition of the IRP, the fact that the request for the abolition was put forward by Rafsanjani and Khameneh'i was a sign of a compromise with this reality. This is to say that the request was put forward by both factions. From the reformist point of view, the IRP had already lost its usefulness since it was under the control of conservatives. From the conservative point of view, the IRP had become a paralyzed body which could not function but was a scene of constant confrontation which could damage the whole system. The final abolition of the IRP by Ayatollah Khomeini was clearly a move directed against the conservative faction. The growing strength of this faction, at the expense of the reformist faction (with the IRP under its control) suffered a limited setback with the IRP's abolition.

KHOMENI'S DECREES

Among the 1987-89 developments, Ayatollah Khomeini's decrees were the most visible sign of the threat to the IRI by the social crisis and factional split. These decrees also showed Khomeini's resolve in providing, as best as he could, a solution for the crisis. The first decree was issued in December 1987 when the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare asked for and received Khomeini's opinion on the most controversial and important part of the new labor law. According to the first point of this law, the state may provide the private sector with a variety of services and in return ask this sector to operate according to the rules set by the ministry. Ayatollah Khomeini's answer to Abol-Qasem Sarhadizadeh (the Minister of Labor) came on 7 December 1987. While the letter of enquiry was two paragraphs long, Ayatollah Khomeini's decree came in one line suggesting that the state may ask for obedience in return for services. The implications of this decree were far greater than this one line. When asked about its implications, Sarhadizadeh said: 'The Great Imam's answer has very large dimensions and this great decree is going to pave the way for the Islamic government and will guide it in the future.'¹¹ In his opinion from this point on, the state could regulate prices, social and medical services and take a much more active role in society. He also added:

Basically we had this unclear understanding, in our religious circles, about the limitations of an Islamic state. And we had seen repeatedly how the government policies were brought under question because of the unclear status of their legitimacy . . . with these words we have a more clear view of the state's authority.¹²

The Decrees of 22 December, 1987

Ayatollah Khomeini's next two decrees were significant because they showed how government officials had to go to him to solve complex as well as relatively simple issues. The first decree was issued in an answer to questions put forward by the head of the National Radio and

Television. In a letter, Mohammad Hashemi-Rafsanjani asked Ayatollah Khomeini for his opinion on two types of television programming: First, those programs in which the actresses do not observe *hejab* (i.e. foreign films); second, those sport programs in which male athletes appear with parts of their bodies on view (e.g. soccer). Another letter on the same issue was sent to Ayatollah Khomeini by Ferdowsi-Pur, the head of the National Radio and Television Council. His point was that some pious and highly religious audiences had complained about the un-Islamic nature of some of the programs. Khomeini's decree ruled that most of the programs were acceptable and even educational, but that some minor problems did occur occasionally and had to be taken care of. But he emphasized two points: The person in charge of make-up must not be a foreigner (he used the word *ghirabi* which may also mean non-Muslim). The viewers must not watch the programs with a lustful eye.¹³

The second decree was in answer to a letter by one of the Guardian Council's secretaries. The answer to this letter was important because the question was being asked by the conservative faction and was a counterattack by this faction. In his letter, Lotfollah Safi asked Khomeini to elaborate on his recent decree regarding the new labor law. Safi wrote:

[After the decree] many have suggested that the government may replace any Islamic law with any social-economic labor, commerce, agriculture and etc., laws, using this decree.¹⁴

Safi stated his worry that the new decree (or rather the interpretation of it) would undermine the Islamic laws and asked Ayatollah Khomeini to clarify his points. Ayatollah Khomeini's decree, in answering Safi, was a blow to the conservatives. He told Safi that the Islamic government may set rules, while providing any kind of services, and that he (Safi) and others should not listen to rumors. Ayatollah Khomeini also emphasized that the state may do this on all aspects of society and not just the one related to the labor minister's question. Thus, in fact, he gave his consent and support to the reformist interpretation of his initial decree.

The Decree of 6 January 1988

This decree was the strongest and was a crushing blow to the conservative faction. Ayatollah Khomeini issued this decree in response to President Khameneh'i's interpretation of his first decree. Khameneh'i's speech at Friday prayer (1 January, 1988) was a typical maneuver to cut the sharp edge of Ayatollah Khomeini's new stand on the role of the Islamic state. The maneuver was to give a different interpretation of the decrees concerning this issue (different both from the reformist faction and from what Khomeini had emphasized in his second decree of 22 December 1987). The maneuver was a logical counterattack by the conservative faction in the new round of conflict. By doing this, Khameneh'i hoped to draw no response from Ayatollah Khomeini, thus leaving the issue (i.e. the role of the executive of the Islamic state) unsettled. Had this policy proved successful, the issue would have been settled in a more favorable manner

for the conservative faction. In his speech, Khameneh'i voiced support for the notion of the role of the Islamic State in general and the executive branch in particular. He suggested that: '... the people should be aware that what is meant by the presence of the Islamic government is a principle . . .'¹⁵ But soon he showed what he meant was in fact different from what Ayatollah Khomeini had in mind. Regarding the first decree (in answering the minister of labor), Khameneh'i suggested that: if, for example, a factory owner (i.e. the private sector) is not giving fair treatment to the worker, then the state which provides the factory with services can require Islamic state. He went on to say that Khameneh'i's understanding of his (Khomeini's) views was not correct.

Your suggestion that I have said that the state has authority within divine laws is totally against my words.¹⁶

Khomeini went on to explain his view about the authority of the Islamic state one more time and in detail.

The state is a branch of prophet's absolute rule and this is one of the principal laws [*lahkam-e avalieh*] of Islam and has priority over all the secondary laws [*lahkam-e faeh*] even prayer (*namaz*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*) and fasting (*ruzeh*) . . . The ruler can close the mosques when needed . . . the state can on its own abrogate its religiously lawful (*sharia*) contracts with the people when the contracts are found to be against the interest of the country and Islam.

What Khomeini in fact said was that the state (*velayat*) and government (*hokumat*) were above the religious laws (*sharia*). The religious laws are interpreted by the high ranking Shii clergy who under the IRI constitution are not included in the state. The state, on the other hand, according to the IRI constitution, has the Supreme Leader (*vali-e faqih*) as its highest authority. The legal side of the issue, therefore, concerns the question of which of the two Islamic authorities has the higher authority? The answer even before Khomeini's decree was unofficially known. The decree made it official. When it came to power, the state (i.e. the *vali-e faqih*) is the absolute ruler. Ayatollah Khomeini's decree had two dimensions. On the religious side, it reaffirmed the authority of the state as the absolute interpreter and applier of the law. On the political side it was a total and unquestioning support for the reformist faction. From this point on, the reformist faction moved to take the most advantage. Thus the office of propaganda for Oom's Theological School declared: 'The Imam's new decree will crush the deviating line.'¹⁷ And the leading reformist figure, Prime Minister Mousavi, said: 'Any unrelated interpretation about the message can show who really is a supporter of the Imam's line.'¹⁸ And the most direct choice of words from Hojjat al-Islam Aba'i (the head of the office of propaganda for Oom's Theological School): 'The Islamic government is a part of the principal laws which have priority over other principal laws. If there is a contradiction between the law of the state and a principal religious law (*sharia*), according to the Imam's words the state law has priority.'¹⁹

As expected, the conservative faction retreated quickly. In a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRI President bowed to his version of Islamic state and in return received a letter of pardon from him.²⁰ Imami-Kashani, the speaker and a member the Council of Guardians – the main power-base of the conservative faction within the constitutional organs – suggested that owing to the new decree, the Council would review all the rejected laws.²¹ This meant that all the laws that had been a source of disagreement between the two factions, reflected in disputes between the Majles and the Council of Guardians, would be reviewed. The heavy hand of Khomeini's authority had come down so hard on the conservative faction that it had no choice but to retreat as fast as it could.

Khomeini's decrees on the power and authority of the Islamic state were put under 'discussion' in a seminar of all the *Juma* (congregational Friday) Prayer Imams. This seminar would instruct the *Juma* Imams about the real meaning and magnitude of the decrees. The *Juma* Imams from all over Iran then would go to the people and explain it to them. (This ancient form of communication has proven to be very effective in keeping the IRI in touch with the masses.) The seminar gave its full support to the decrees and suggested that they would be an objective solution to many problems and difficulties facing the IRI:

The direct and enlightening decree and the pathfinding answer of the great leader of the revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini, in answering the letter of the honorable President of the Islamic Republic, has brought to the fore a new movement and revolution in the whole Islamic system, whose valuable fruits will not only benefit our Moslem generation but will also benefit future ones.²²

The Khomeini decrees, the reformist offensive, the conservative retreat and the seminars and speeches would have been only talk if they had not been followed by action. In this context, Khomeini issued yet another decree which was not only a concrete attack on the conservative faction, but went beyond the limitations of the IRI constitution. By Ayatollah Khomeini's order, a new body was created named the Council for Identifying the Interests of the Islamic System (*majma'-e tashkhis-e mas'ala'-e nezam-e Islami*). The function of this body was to review the differences and the deadlock between the Majles and the Guardian Council and to give final decisions by a majority vote. According to Khoeinia the tasks of the Council were:

By the Council's decision, that group of laws and bills that the Majles has found in society's interest, but will not be passed due to the Guardian Council's criticism, will be brought back to the Council to decide whether or not its objections have been answered.

Of course, some of the bills that have been rejected by the Guardian Council, for religious and legal reasons, will be sent back to the Majles if they are ready to accept them.

If a bill is criticized by the Guardian Council in a way such that its

principles and philosophy are harmed, such as the labor law or the foreign trade law, then the council will decide on them.²¹

The bills that have been passed by the Majles (some of them many years ago) but have not been approved by the Council are nine altogether. These are at the heart of the factional disputes, and are basically concerned with domestic and economic issues. Some of these bills are as follows: a bill for the just distribution of goods by the state; a bill for taxation; a bill concerning the nationalization of foreign trade; and the labor law. All these were rejected on religious (sharia) grounds.

The creation of the new Council was beyond the IRI's constitutional provisions. No such body was suggested in the constitution, probably because no such situation had been thought of. According to the IRI constitution,²⁴ the Majles is responsible for passing the laws of the nation (Articles 71 to 85), but before its bills become law, they must be approved by the Council of Guardians (Articles 91, 92, 93). If a bill is not, then it would be returned to the Majles for modification. It is this process that has kept the nine important bills from becoming law.²⁵ At any rate, the Council has remained relatively inactive since its creation as more crises engulfed the IRI during 1988 and 1989.

The election of the third Majles, held in March 1988, completed the reformist victory. This development meant a big setback for the conservative faction which had campaigned hard for its candidates. Khomeini's speech before the election aided the eventual victors:

The brave people of Iran should vote for the candidates who have experienced poverty and who in word and deed defend the Islam of the bare footed (*sabherahnegan*) of the earth, the Islam of the oppressed (*mostazafin*), the Islam of the toilers of history . . . and reject . . . those individuals who support the Islam of capitalism, the Islam of the oppressors (*mostakbarin*) . . . in one word American Islam.²⁶

Following this speech and with the growth of an anti-conservative atmosphere, a split developed within the ranks of the *Society of Tehran's Militant Clergy*. The group which split off naming itself the *Militant Clergy*, sided with the reformists and declared its own separate list of candidates.²⁷ Hojrat al-Islam Ashtiani, on the staff of Khomeini's office, had this to say about the split: 'The need for the presence, in the third Majles, of candidates who believe in the Imam's Line, caused the split of the *Militant Clergy*.'²⁸ The *Society of Tehran's Militant Clergy* had been one of the IRI's (and that of the clergy establishment) most important organs since the early days of the Revolution. Therefore, a split in this body was an important development in the continuing factional infighting which also showed an escalation of the political crises. Khomeini's only reaction was to support it and suggest that a split did not necessarily mean that there were differences between the two groups.³⁰

THE THIRD FACTION

As noted, the factions function as loose coalitions rather than as political parties. This fact had been even more true in the statist-reformist case. This faction was united in its opposition to the conservatives and over domestic issues. Yet the reformists were made up of two groups, namely pragmatists and 'radicals'. The pragmatists, headed by such figures as Raisanjan and Yelayati have basically been in charge of the IRI foreign policy from 1964 on. By 1988 their power base became the Foreign Ministry, a strong presence in the Majles which changed to a majority control after the third Majles election and the leadership of the armed forces of the IRI.³¹ Their social base is modern middle class, professionals and the modern private industrial sector. The 'radicals', by 1988, were in control of the Cabinet (minus the Foreign Ministry) and have had a strong presence in the Majles and the judicial system. Personalities such as Musavi (former Prime Minister), Mofashami (former Interior Minister) and Ghaffari (Majles Member) belong to this group. Their social base is more at the grassroots of such Islamic organs as various foundations, pasdaran, and the Hezbollah.

On foreign policy the strategy of the pragmatists has been to establish friendly relations with both the West and the East.³² For implementing their strategy they had Ayatollah Khomeini's support. The 'Irangate' affair was a good example of such support. Today it has become clear that those who planned the general policy outline of 'Irangate' believed that they could count on Khomeini's support and in fact received it. When the 'Irangate' policy came under heavy attack from the conservative faction Khomeini intervened directly and silenced critical voices.³³ The pragmatists' policy of rapprochement was related to their policy of normalization both at home and abroad. Hence it was this faction that masterminded the IRI's acceptance of the cease-fire with Iraq. The pragmatists' strategy of rapprochement contradicted the 'radicals' isolationist strategy in foreign policy.³⁴ The 'radicals' were basically in charge of the IRI foreign policy from June 1981 to 1984 and their isolationist policy had proven not to be advantageous to IRI's war efforts. But the factor that played the main role in splitting the two was the pragmatists' successful peace efforts which were opposed by the 'radicals'.

Hence the reformist faction was actually a fragile coalition formed around current issues. It advocated a greater state role in the economy, and was made up of two wings. The advocates of an isolationist foreign policy, formed the 'radical' wing of the coalition, and the advocates of rapprochement made up its pragmatist wing. Between 1984 and the first half of 1988 (end of the Iran-Iraq war) domestic issues were of greater importance, and, because of the war, foreign policy was less a source of confrontation. Therefore the two groups formed the two wings of a coalition and established a united front against the conservative faction.

The IRI's acceptance of resolution 598 was a surprise to many observers including some IRI officials. Since Iran's acceptance of a cease-fire (August 1988) came with Khomeini's authority, most voices of dissent were silenced.

Ayatollah Khomeini asked his supporters not to question the decision and supported Ratsanjani when he was being blamed as being the main architect of peace.³⁵ The Majles, where one expects the main discussion over this issue to take place, was recessed in late July.³⁶ The regime clearly did not want any objection or voice of dissent about this decision. Yet, while the issue of peace could not be discussed, the issue of post-war reconstruction was left open for the factions to dispute with one another about it.

The end of the Iran-Iraq war divided the reformist faction on the height of its victory against the conservatives. The first signs of the split became evident with the resignation of Prime Minister Musavi in September 1988. He stated as the reason for his resignation his inability to receive a vote of confidence, from the third Majles, for five to eight of his ministers.³⁷ Musavi had tried, rather successfully, the use of resignation as a means of drawing Khomeini's support for his cabinet. Four years earlier, when his cabinet was faced with the danger of a no-confidence vote from the Majles, he resigned but was reinstated by Khomeini and was thus able to receive the necessary votes. This time, however, Ayatollah Khomeini rejected his resignation but refused to endorse Musavi's cabinet and said that the voting was the business of Majles.³⁸ A study of Majles votes further shows the scope of the split. While Musavi himself had received a vote of confidence earlier (28 June 1988), some of his ministers who have been identified with him and the 'radicals', either did not, or only narrowly escaped, rejection.³⁹ Immediately following the Iran-Iraq cease-fire post-war reconstruction became an important potential source of conflict between all these factions. President Khameneh's attack on the 'radicals' is an interesting example:

Some people said at the start of the war that we did not need weapons – just go and make Molotov cocktails to defeat the Iraqis. This is an honest mentality, but also infantile. Ten thousand people with Molotov cocktails can be mowed down by ten tanks. In reconstruction, they say everything should be built by Iranians. All right, but when? When Iranians have acquired foreign sciences?⁴⁰

Issues such as reconstruction and foreign policy has completed the polarization of the statist-reformist faction. Hence by 1989, elite factionalism in the IRI includes the conservatives, the 'radical'-statists and the pragmatic-reformists. Currently the main difference between 'radicals' and the pragmatists seems to be over the role of foreign relations and their effect on domestic problems especially reconstruction. The 'radicals' believe in reconstruction under strict state control but with limited foreign involvement. The pragmatists believe in reconstruction under state control, but including foreign involvement and investment.⁴¹

THE SATANIC VERSES

In February 1989 Khomeini's decree on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the international controversy that followed it suggested that the factional balance in the IRI was about to change. After violent demonstrations in Pakistan and India in denouncing Rushdie, Khomeini

issued a decree asking for Rushdie's death.⁴² A few days later, on 22 February, Khomeini openly attacked those 'liberals' who try to mislead the revolution.⁴³ Following these events some twelve West European governments reduced their diplomatic missions in Tehran to show their objection to his actions.

If nothing else, the Salman Rushdie crisis showed, yet again, Khomeini's essential and decisive role in the decision-making process of the IRI. But why did Khomeini decide to take such an extreme action? Did not this mean a complete reversal of the rapprochement policy and thus a strong setback for the pragmatists? Which factors, other than *The Satanic Verses*, were responsible for such a sudden shift of policy?

Khomeini's initial angry reaction to *The Satanic Verses* and his death decree against Salman Rushdie looked like more of an angry emotional outburst rather than a pre-planned move against the pragmatists. There had been a similar angry outburst a few weeks earlier. In this case Khomeini asked for the severe punishment of five radio officials who were responsible for a disrespectful program regarding the daughter of the Prophet. In this program a woman interviewed on radio had suggested that her role model was a Japanese television personality rather than Prophet's daughter, Fatimah. In his angry response, Khomeini asked for the death of those responsible if it was intentional and heavy punishment if it was not. A few days later he forgave all of them.

Whether the outburst against Rushdie was pre-planned or incidental, the outcome was very advantageous to the 'radical' statist and their isolationist policy. Yet Khomeini did not make any move against the pragmatists. This left them in a strong position for the future. But the outcome of the death decree, although damaging to the IRI's relations with the West, aided the state in satisfying those supporters who were both fanatical and disappointed with the outcome of the war and the new rapprochement policy.

MONTAZERI'S DEMISE

Grand Ayatollah Hasan Ali Montazeri's demise has caused many in the West to speculate that his dismissal on 28 March, 1989 has been a blow to the 'moderates' in the IRI and even to Ratsanjani himself.⁴⁴ A closer examination of Montazeri's role in the IRI factional struggle shows these speculations to be incorrect.

IRI newspapers declared Montazeri the successor to Khomeini in November 1985. He was given the title *qaem maqam-e rahbari* (successor to the leader) until his removal. Montazeri was a close aide to Ayatollah Khomeini as well as his student for many years. Owing to Montazeri's relatively low clerical rank considerable effort was made to elevate his position to an acceptable level. Yet even today he is not acceptable to many as 'Grand Ayatollah' and *majlis*. Indeed Ayatollah Khomeini referred to him as *hojjat al-Islam* (which is a much lower rank than 'Grand Ayatollah') when accepting his resignation. The Montazeri selection had been from the start a purely political one. He had been viewed as a person

who would follow Khomeini's path. But Montazeri's activities, unlike those of Khomeini, were openly and increasingly in contradiction to Khomeini's policies. From 1985 to 1989, he was an active mullah, publicly stating his opinion on socio-political issues. The 'frangate' affair and the elimination of the Hashemi group served to weaken Montazeri's position considerably. Although the Hashemi group acted as a 'renegade' and independent entity which was mainly concerned with foreign policy (i.e. exporting 'Islamic revolution'), the very fact that the group acted through Montazeri's office and that some of its members were relatives of Montazeri, was damaging to his position.

Montazeri's dismissal, however was linked to his more recent activities. These activities resulted from his increasing dissatisfaction with the IRI's human rights record (indeed one of the activities he is being blamed for is paying attention to the Amnesty International reports on the situation of human rights in Iran);⁴⁵ his opposition to the creation of the Council of Interests (as being unconstitutional); his attacks on the management of the war; his complaints about lack of freedom in the country and inefficiency of the government.⁴⁶ But the most important move he made was to become close to the Islamic 'liberals' and Bazargan's followers. Hence Khomeini's February 1989 attack on the 'liberals' was in fact an indirect attack on Montazeri.

Montazeri was not linked to any of the ruling factions. He used his position as successor to reflect some of the popular discontents without siding with any of the ruling factions. Therefore his dismissal was not really a blow to any of the ruling factions. But it apparently was one to the Islamic 'liberals' who were trying to penetrate the state.

CONCLUSION

By 1989, three fully developed ruling factions were in place in the IRI politics. It was clear that in the factional struggles of 1987-89, and while Khomeini was alive, the conservatives were the big losers. They were exposed as supporting the 'Islam of capitalists' by Ayatollah Khomeini himself. Yet the other two factions were not immune either and had setbacks. The 'radicals' were disappointed with the war cease-fire and after all none of their social programs was implemented as yet. The pragmatists, who had the most success and should be considered the dominant faction, also saw their efforts in foreign policy dealt a setback, although it was limited and temporary. As long as Khomeini was alive a study of elite factionalism in the IRI showed the dependence of various factions on Khomeini's support. But what was his role? And how would the future look now that he is gone?

It is clear that Khomeini's decision to side with one or other faction was not intended to eliminate them unless their activities threatened the whole system. He did not move against the Islamic 'liberals' until he felt that their activities were endangering the system. Clearly, he did not support the conservatives' version of the Islamic state and economic policy. But he found in it sufficient reason to 'put them' in their place rather than to

eliminate them altogether. In his move against the conservatives he made a clear, and within Shi'i tradition a provocative, choice as far as the role of Islamic state is concerned. The absolute rule of the faqih is a new notion which runs in direct contradiction to the traditional Shi'i notion of different *marjas*. To put it simply, Khomeini implied that one top *marja* may dominate and rule over other *marjas*.

Another clear choice he made during his move against the conservatives related to the economic path of the IRI. Clearly the economy of the IRI is based on the capitalist mode of production.⁴⁷ Khomeini's siding with the statist-reformists must be studied in this context. At the core of reformist-conservative dispute was state-capitalism vs. non-state 'laissez faire' capitalism. Khomeini chose state capitalism for two reasons, namely: the reformists' advocacy of strong centralized government as against decentralization and governmental non-interference advocated by the conservatives; and, the Islamic egalitarianism of the reformists as against the passive role advocated by the conservatives.

But as Ayatollah Khomeini was throwing his weight on the statist-reformist side, this faction split over new issues (i.e. cease-fire, reconstruction, foreign policy etc.). It was not clear, at the time of his death, which of the two splinter factions he favored. What was clear, however, was that the pragmatists had gained a dominant position.

To understand Ayatollah Khomeini's maneuvering between factions one must understand his perception of what may be a threat to Islam (i.e. the system). In a written answer to Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Ali Ansari, a member of his staff, Khomeini clarified his position. Ansari's written question states:

Two ideological and political currents, which are both supporters of the Revolution and Islam and have many supporters and important personalities among them, are facing each other in competition more seriously than ever.⁴⁸

He continued by saying that although both of these groups were faithful to the Revolution, one did not know which one was right. Khomeini's answer was that as long as their differences were not on principles, and thus were not weakening the system, they were acceptable.⁴⁹ But what are these principles? They are the principles of Islam which, in the Shi'i tradition, can only be set by the *marjas*. Since in today's Iran the absolute rule of one *marja* (i.e. the Rule of Jurisprudent - Khomeini and supposedly his successor) is the law of the land, what he was saying was that as long as they did not oppose his version of Islam they might function as factions. He acted as a balancing force for those loyal to him and simply eliminated whoever did not accept his version of Islam.

Of course, Khomeini's role should not imply that one man - himself - could decide the fate of a nation independent of objective circumstances. Certainly the practicality of a faction's policy had a direct effect on the complex relations between Khomeini and the ruling factions. While he was the ultimate authority and the factions sought his approval for their legitimacy, the factions played an important role in shaping his own views.

Ayatollah Khomeini died on 3 June 1989 without naming a successor. His death left many of the IRI's problems, especially elite factionalism, unresolved. The same day a specially elected body, the *Khobregan* (which was to name Khomeini's successor) named Ali Khameneh'i as the new Supreme Leader. According to Ayatollah Khezali, a member of the *Khobregan*, three members of this body convinced the rest, of eighty or so, to select Khameneh'i.⁵⁰ The *Khobregan* did this after eight hours of deliberation. From this point on the IRI media began to address Khameneh'i as 'ayatollah'. The armed forces of the IRI pledged their loyalty to the new leader on 5 June.

Khameneh'i's selection to the post of Supreme Leader and the elevation of his religious rank from *hojjat al-Islam* to *ayatollah* still did not make him a *marja*. To fill this apparent vacuum, a number of *ayatollahs* from Qom's theological school declared that their *marja*, now that Khomeini was gone, was Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Araki and asked others to emulate him.⁵¹ In his first decree, Araki, a hundred year-old, declared that his followers may continue to use Khomeini's teaching as their source.

On the cabinet level, Raisanjani was confirmed as the IRI president on 28 June 1989. Simultaneously, a referendum on some constitutional changes eliminated the post of prime minister (the 'radical' power-base) and concentrated power in the office of president. Raisanjani's new cabinet, made up mostly of specialists and western educated members, received a vote of confidence from the *Majles*. This was the first time in the history of the IRI that a cabinet had managed to get confirmed by the *Majles* without the rejection of any of its members.

Ayatollah Khomeini's death left the IRI factions without their usual source of legitimization. From this point on they had to function without this balancing force. It seems that the factions' maneuvering for power started even before his death. The pragmatists, who were in the dominant position, could no longer keep their alliance with the 'radicals' owing to deep differences on foreign policy and reconstruction. Clearly, Khameneh'i's selection was a political choice, since he did not have the religious authority to be Khomeini's replacement. It appears that, at least temporarily, both pragmatists and the conservatives reached a compromise on how to divide power. The pragmatists are in charge of the cabinet and enjoy a majority in the *Majlis*. The conservatives are in charge of the Council of Guardians and of the post of the Supreme Leader although without the backup of strong religious authority. The 'radicals' have lost important positions but have not been eliminated and have a presence in the *Majles*, mid-level cabinet positions and the judiciary.

NOTES

The original draft of this paper was presented, as a supplement, to the Iran, the US and the USSR conference, held at University of California at Los Angeles (22-23 April 1989). I wish to acknowledge the encouragement and helpful comments of Professor Nikki Keddie.

1. Shahrugh Akhavi, 'Elite Factionalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Middle East Journal* 2 (Spring 1987): 184.
2. The Council of Guardians in a constitutional body in charge of reviewing the bills passed by the *Majles*. The Council may dismiss any bill on grounds of religious law or on constitutional grounds. The Council is made up of six Islamic jurists (selected by Khomeini) and six lawyers.
3. The term 'radical' is not completely accurate but I use it henceforth, for the lack of a better term.
4. The Hashemi group was the core of an organ named Liberation Movement Support Center. The head of the group was Mehdi Hashemi. Hashemi was a distant relative of Ayatollah Hassan Ali Montazeri and a close childhood friend of Mohammad Montazeri (the Ayatollah's son) for whom he worked in the Movement and Montazeri's office. The group had close connections with Falah and Yasser Arafat himself. The group is credited with exposing the McFarlane mission to Tehran (1986), through a Lebanese newspaper. Subsequently, Hashemi and his accomplices were arrested, on different charges, and Mehdi was executed. For more on this group and its history, see: 'On Seyed Mehdi Hashemi And His Group', *Iran Press Digest*, no. 43, 44 (November 1986).
5. Akhavi, p. 183.
6. Saeed Ahmadi, 'About the Abolition of the Islamic Republican Party', *Aqazi*, No. 5-6 (Summer-Fall 1987), 27. Raisanjani spoke about this while addressing the first Party Congress (1983). Ahmadi's article is a good analysis of the history of the IRP.
7. Many party members were caught while attacking demonstrations and posing as Hezbollah. The most famous of such incidents was the clash at a Bani-Sadr rally (March 1981).
8. Ahmadi, p. 27.
9. Raisanjani's position must be evaluated with more care. He, along with his supporters, is a pragmatist. On domestic issues they sided with the 'radicals', while on foreign policy matters they have serious differences with the 'radical' reformists.
10. For a list of the new Council of Leadership and an analysis of the outcome of the Congress, see: Ahmadi, p. 30.
11. For Sarhadzadeh's question and opinion and Khomeini's decree, see: *Kayhan Hava'i*, 16 December 1987.
12. *Ibid.*
13. For the questions and Khomeini's decree on TV programs, see: *Kayhan Hava'i*, 30, December 1987.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Kayhan Hava'i*, 5 January 1988.
16. For Khomeini's answer see: *Kayhan* (Tehran), 7 January 1988.
17. *Kayhan* (Tehran), 10 January 1988.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Kayhan* (Tehran), 11 January 1988.
20. *Kayhan Hava'i*, 20 January 1988.
21. *Ibid.*
22. For a report on the result of the Seminar, see: *Kayhan Hava'i*, 27 January 1988.
23. For Khomeini's decree and other information concerning this decree, see: *Iran Times*, 12 February 1988.
24. *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, trans. H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan press, 1980) 66.
25. Article 110 of IRI's constitution identifies the duties and power limitations of the Leader as follows: (1) Appointment of the clergy on the Council of Guardians. (2) Appointment of the supreme judicial authority. (3) Being the supreme commander of the armed forces. (4) Signing the decree formalizing the election of the president of the IRI. (5) Dismissal of the president. (6) Pardoning of convicts or reducing the sentences.
26. *Kayhan* (Tehran), 31 March 1988.
27. *Iran Times*, 8 April 1988.
29. *Kayhan* (Tehran), 13 April 1988.
30. *Iran Times*, 19 April 1988.
31. By Khomeini's order all of his powers as the supreme commander of the armed forces

- were transferred to Rafsanjani in June 1988. Rafsanjani kept this position until he was elected to the presidency of the IRI. See: *Kayhan Hava'i*, 8 June 1988.
32. For more on factions, and the IRI foreign policy see: Maziar Behrooz, 'Trends In The Foreign Policy Of The Islamic Republic Of Iran 1979-1988' in Nikkei R. Keddie and Mark Gasiorowski, eds., *Iran, the US and the USSR*, Yale University Press, 1990.
33. *Kayhan* (Tehran), 22 November 1986. Rafsanjani suggests that Khomeini knew about the affair by saying: 'Of course, that day, we could arrest them [the Meftariane group], put them on trial and have them shot as spies. But such action did not fit into Imam, we decided to let the gentlemen leave in good health.' See *Kayhan Hava'i*, 24 December 1986.
34. Behrooz.
35. *Iran Times*, 7 October 1988.
36. *Iran Times*, 9 September 1988.
37. *Kayhan Hava'i*, 14 September 1988.
38. *Ibid.*
39. The rejected ministers were Education and Training Minister Kazem Akrami and the Agriculture Minister Abbas Ali Zali. The ministers who narrowly received a vote of confidence were such known 'radical' reformists as Interior Minister Mohashami, and Behzad Nabavi. This is while such Rafsanjani allies as Foreign Minister Velayati received solid support. See: *Kayhan Hava'i*, 21 September 1988.
40. *Iran Times*, 9 September 1988.
41. Ahmad Ashraf, in a recent interview, has categorized the factions the same way through under slightly different names. He calls them the conservative/traditionalists, the pragmatic/moderates and the radicals. He also makes the following characterization of the factions:
- The conservatives, with the support of the bazaar-mosque alliance, argue for the sanctity of private property and unlimited freedom of commercial and industrial activities in Islamic jurisprudence. They even oppose the minimum wage, arguing that in Islam free market labor accepts the proposed wage of its free will. On the other side, the radicals advocate a ceiling on agricultural land, confiscation of lands in urban areas, nationalization of foreign trade. . . . In all, their program adds up to a form statism or state socialism. The pragmatists support a mixed economy.
- See: *Middle East Report*, No. 156, January 1989, 13.
42. *Kayhan Hava'i*, 22 February 1989.
43. *Iran Times* 24 February 1989.
44. *New York Times*, 3 March 1989. I do not think the use of the term 'moderate', by some observers, is appropriate in describing the IRI factions. The use of 'moderate' has served to confuse readers more than to help them to understand the realities of the IRI. For example, Rafsanjani has been called a 'moderate' while he has been active in suppressing Montazeri and his supporters who have been known as 'moderates' as well.
45. The criticism was published in *The Tehran Times* which is an English language daily controlled by the Foreign Ministry. Therefore the attack on Montazeri was coming from the pragmatic faction. See: *Iran Times*, 17 April 1989.
46. *Ibid.*
47. M. H. Pesaran, 'The System of Dependent Capitalism in Pre-and Post-Revolution Iran', in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, November 1982, p. 14.
48. *Kayhan Hava'i*, 16 November 1988.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Iran Times*, 6 June 1989.
51. *Iran Times*, 16 June 1989.

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