

Revolutionary guards control finance and repression

Iran's unelected power

Behrouz Aref and Behrouz Farahany

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Iran's Revolutionary Guards have been sustained in their political and financial ascendancy by their reputed ties to Ahmedinejad since his days as mayor of Tehran. But do they support him – or their own longer-term agenda?

Soon after the Islamic Republic was created in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini, who was fearful of a coup and conscious of disorganisation in what had been the shah's army, set up a new military force. This army of the disinherited, established on 22 April 1979, was legalised by article 150 of the constitution as the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution, or Pasdaran, also known as the Revolutionary Guards. Their mission is "to safeguard the Islamic revolution, security and public order".

The deepening crisis within the regime in 1980-1, the removal of Abolhassan Banisadr, its first president, and the armed revolt led by the People's Mujahedin of Iran (1), led the Revolutionary Guards to repression to confirm Khomeini's power. When Iraq declared war on Iran in September 1980, the Guards were the only organised force capable of defending the regime against external and internal enemies. They were in charge of military strategy as well as food imports under rationing. They were responsible for the protection of state officials and sat on revolutionary committees claiming to speak for Khomeini.

The dismantling of the radical opposition and the first victories against Iraq ended Iran's revolutionary period. In a declaration on 6 December 1982, Khomeini recognised the legitimacy of the private sector and private property, and called on the Guards to concentrate on the war effort. After his death in 1989, the Guards backed Ali Khamenei in the election for Supreme Leader (the highest religious and political position) and Ali Akbar Rafsanjani for the presidency. Though the Guards lost political influence during the 1990s, they made up for that by strengthening their hold over the economy. (This is in line with article 147 of the constitution: "In time of peace, the government must utilise the personnel and technical equipment of the Army in relief operations, and for educational and productive ends.") The activities of the many companies overseen by the Guards are coordinated by the Khatam al-Anbia (construction base) or GHORB, created in 1990.

The growing power of Rafsanjani's circle, many of whom were amassing fortunes, alarmed Khamenei and the conservatives. When, in March 1996, Rafsanjani's "reformers" made a breakthrough in the first round of the elections for the fifth Islamic assembly, Khamenei called on the Guards for help: he needed support, lacking Khomeini's charisma, political aura and religious authority. So on 6 April 1996 General Yahya Rahim Safavi, commander in chief of the Guards, said that they needed to "come on stage for the second round and with our vote ensure that not one liberal likely to create complications for the people and the country gets into the Assembly" (2).

Safavi's intervention turned the power relations within the regime upside down and halted the reformers' progress. Yet even so, the surprise victory of Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997, beating the conservative candidate Nategh-Nouri, showed how fragile the balance was.

During Khatami's two terms in office (1997-2005), the Guards sought to undermine his reforms. They controlled a third of Iranian imports through 60 landing stages they had built on the Gulf coast and 10 airports, including Payam near Tehran (which officially belongs to the post and telecommunications ministry). Mohammad Ali Moshaffeq, an aide to the former speaker of the parliament and 2005 presidential candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, said that "more than 25 entrance doors of Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran are publicly claimed to be outside customs control, and no measure has been taken to exert control" (3).

Power upon power

A number of ministers and secretaries of state are part of the command structure of the Guards. During Ahmadinejad's 2003-5 term as mayor of Tehran, he helped GHORB win major contracts for public works with a budget of \$2.2bn, including a motorway and underground railway construction. In 2005 the Guards' power was reinforced when Khatami's divided supporters were defeated and Ahmadinejad was elected president, beating Rafsanjani who had come to represent corruption and cronyism.

According to a blog by Mirhossein Mousavi – the candidate declared to have lost the last presidential election – GHORB controls more than 800 companies in many fields. These include: the army (manufacturing rockets and missiles); construction and development (road and dam building, mining, irrigation); petroleum and gas extraction (GHORB was awarded a \$2.2bn contract to build a 600km oil pipeline to India in June 2009); communications (in 2009 the Etemad Mobin Development Company, affiliated to the Guards, took control of more than 50% of the state Telecommunication Company of Iran without any other bids being invited, a transaction that cost nearly \$8bn); and finance (the transformation of two ostensibly charitable foundations into banks is under way).

Plans for a further Guard project were unveiled in November 2009 – the construction of the Chabahar railway in the southeast at a cost of \$2.5bn. "We are not a war machine that is useless in peace time," (4) said General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander-in-chief of the Guards. He felt obliged to respond in press and parliament to critics who compared his activities to the mafia: the Guards "and the military mafias you see in many countries, including in some of our neighbourhoods, have absolutely nothing in common".

Since the demonstrations provoked by last June's fraudulent election (5), the Guards have crucially backed Khamenei and carried out repression. Their 125,000 members are spread throughout several corps of the army and also control the Basij (volunteer militia). In October General Abdollah Araghi, commander of the Guards' Rasoul-ol-lah corps, confirmed that his organisation had assumed responsibility for security in the months after the election (6). Yadollah Javani, director of the Guards's political bureau, called for the arrest and sentence of the leaders of the reformist opposition, including Karrubi and Mousavi (7). On 29 December the Guards officially called on the people to

demonstrate in support of the Supreme Leader and accused his opponents of being foreign agents (8). On the Guards' internet site (gerdab.ir) there are photos of demonstrators, accompanied by calls for Muslim people to denounce the participants.

The lack of clarity about the expansion of the Guards' economic and political interests displeases some sectors of Iranian society that are natural supporters of the Islamic Republic: small businessmen, parts of the private sector and politically moderate groups. The Guards have their own internal divisions – some of their support comes from people from poor backgrounds who disapprove of their entrepreneurial activities and coercive tactics. These divisions show how hard it is for the Islamic Republic to decide whether to compromise or crack down.

(1) Founded in 1965, this organisation took part in the struggle against the shah. It played a role in his overthrow in 1979 but broke with Khomeini in 1981 and joined the opposition army. After a ferocious crackdown, a number of its members fled abroad. It installed a military base in Iraq in 1986 during the Iran-Iraq war and allied itself with Saddam Hussein.

(2) *Kayan*, Tehran, 17 April 1996.

(3) “[How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?](#)”, The American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

(4) [The Sepah News website](#) (Arabic).

(5) See Ahmed Salamatian, “[Iran's stolen election](#)”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, July 2009.

(6) BBC Persian Service, 4 October 2009.

(7) *Sobh Sadegh*, Tehran, 21 November 2009.

(8) [Khabar Online](#).

Behrouz Aref and Behrouz Farahany are respectively translator and leader writer for Iranian online newspapers.