



## Spotlight on Iran



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### The return of the political eulogists

In recent weeks, two prominent Iranian preachers have come out strongly against the Iranian president and the chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council. One of them even wished for the death of Rafsanjani. These statements provide additional evidence of the phenomenon of “political eulogists,” which has been growing since the mid 1990s.

Iranian eulogists<sup>1</sup> played a significant role in the relationship between Shiite clerics and Iranian society even before the Islamic revolution, and their state-sponsored activity increased after the revolution. In the 1990s, some eulogists began to express themselves on controversial political issues, criticizing the reform policy led by presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami. The most prominent political eulogist is radical eulogist Mansour Arzi.

During his first term in office, President Ahmadinejad maintained good relationships with some of the eulogists. However, his continuing support for his controversial office chief Rahim Masha'i led to a sharp confrontation between him and the eulogists, who began criticizing his policies and accusing him of harming the values of Islam.

Along with their growing political involvement, the eulogists' social status and influence on the public have also increased in recent years, especially among the poor and young people. The strengthening of their status is particularly salient in view of the erosion in the status of the religious establishment and has increased the religious establishment's concern regarding the eulogists' activity, which is liable to undermine the status of the clergy.

The criticism against Rowhani voiced by some eulogists in recent weeks could indicate their intention to once again increase their political involvement in an attempt to block changes in foreign or domestic policy which, in their view, represent a deviation from the values of the revolution. If necessary, the leaders of the regime may use the eulogists as another means to limit the president's power and mobilize public support against his policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Eulogists (in Farsi: *madahan*) are religious preachers whose job is to arouse and excite the audience during religious ceremonies, especially during the mourning processions held in the month of Muharram to mark the Ashura, the day of the massacre of Imam Hussein and his followers in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. When preaching, the eulogists make use of singing and verse.

## Severe attacks against Rafsanjani and Rowhani by eulogists

In recent weeks, two prominent Iranian eulogists have come out strongly against Iranian President Hassan Rowhani and Expediency Discernment Council Chairman Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. In mid-October Mansour Arzi, one of the most prominent eulogists in Tehran, strongly attacked Rafsanjani and wished him dead. During a religious ceremony in Tehran, Arzi referred to the reservations that Rafsanjani recently expressed about calling for “death to America,” and said: “I hope that God strikes him (Rafsanjani) dead” (<http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/133110>). A few days later, eulogist Sa’id Haddadian addressed the possible appointment of Deputy Minister of Science and Higher Education Ja’far Towfighi as minister. Haddadian, a member of the Leader’s mission at the University of Tehran, warned the president not to appoint ministers who were involved in the riots of 2009. He also warned the members of the Majles not to allow this appointment if it is presented to them by Rowhani (<http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/133223>).

In the wake of these statements, a few Iranian websites sharply criticized the phenomenon of “political eulogists” and their outspoken style. The Asr-e Iran website recently published an editorial claiming that the eulogists – like the other citizens of Iran – are entitled to express their opinions about the affairs of state, but they must maintain a proper style and not use their religious status to voice insults and statements that are not worthy of their position. The website said that in recent years, some political eulogists has behaved “without a vision” and that they continue to do so even now. The website ended the editorial with the words “This is the Islamic Republic of Iran and not the Republic of the Eulogists.” (<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/300346/>-مداحان بی-بصیرت-مردودانی-که-سودای-بیرگشتت-دارند)

The Jomhuriat website also criticized the change in the activity of religious eulogists in recent years, as they have become political eulogists. The political atmosphere in the country and the growing public sympathy towards some of the famous eulogists have increased their entry into political affairs. Some of them possess extremist political orientations and respond strongly, publicly insulting senior officials who disagree with their views. The website said that offensive statements and an outspoken style do not contribute to promoting a culture of healthy criticism among citizens, and they endanger the future of the country.

<http://www.jomhouriat.ir/fa/content/4557/%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B5%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86>)

## The growth of the eulogists and their involvement in politics after the revolution

Iranians eulogists played a significant role in the relationship between Shiite clerics and society even before the Islamic revolution. Their influence was manifested primarily during Ashura ceremonies marking the massacre of Shiite leaders in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. During these ceremonies, eulogists lead the mourning processions, bewailing the dead and recreating the story of the sacrifice (*ta'ziya*) of Imam Hussein and his supporters.

After the Islamic revolution, the activity of state-sponsored religious eulogists increased. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989), eulogists like Sadegh Ahangaran and Gholam Koveitipoor played a significant role in encouraging combatants at the front.

Since the mid-1990s, some eulogists have expressed themselves on controversial political issues, increasingly criticizing the policy of economic and social reforms led by presidents Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). The most prominent political eulogist is Haj Mansour Arzi. Arzi was born in Tehran in 1953. Since the mid-1990s, he has been associated with the radical movement Ansar Hezbollah, which was involved in violent activities against activists and reformist officials, and in the attempted assassination of political opponents. During the Iranian presidential elections in 1997, Arzi took advantage of the Day of Ashura ceremonies to call on his followers not to vote for Mohammad Khatami (<http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/214848/>-آقای ارضی-دین-مردم-را-فدای-دنیا-ی-دیگران-نکنید).

In the 2005 election campaign, Arzi sharply criticized two of the candidates who ran against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the elections: former President Rafsanjani and Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, currently Mayor of Tehran. Arzi compared Qalibaf to Amr bin Sa'ad, who led the forces of Umayyad Caliph Yazid I, who slaughtered Hussein bin Ali in the Battle of Karbala massacre (<http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/214820/> / - کندی - و - کاوی - / در - عملکرد - سیاسی - یک - مداح).



**Mansour Arzi**

### The eulogists and Ahmadinejad: from honeymoon to acute conflict

During his first term as president (2005-2009), Ahmadinejad maintained close ties with the religious eulogists. The cooperation between Ahmadinejad and the eulogists is rooted in the assistance that Ahmadinejad provided for their activities during his term in office as mayor of Tehran (2003-2005). Ahmadinejad's messianic perceptions and sympathy towards expressions of popular Islam created a convenient base for closeness between the president and some of the eulogists, led by Mansour Arzi. Arzi also participated in the president's trips to provinces throughout Iran, along with members of his cabinet. The president, on his part, would meet regularly with eulogists who were close to him

(<http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/92072716175/%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D9%88>).



**Ahmadinejad with eulogists. On the right: Mansour Arzi**  
[http://cdn.asriran.com/files/fa/news/1391/12/27/275890\\_678.jpg](http://cdn.asriran.com/files/fa/news/1391/12/27/275890_678.jpg)

The eulogists continued to support Ahmadinejad in the 2009 presidential elections and during the political crisis that broke out after the elections. Nevertheless, the president's identification with the "deviant faction" in the second half of his term in office and his continuous and unqualified support of his controversial office chief Rahim Masha'i led to a major conflict between the president and the eulogists. The eulogists began to express severe criticism of the president and his office chief, attacking his economic, religious and social policies and accusing him of harming the values of Islam. In January 2010, Arzi declared that Masha'i was worse than Salman Rushdie, author of the book *The Satanic Verses* who was sentenced to death by Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamic revolution.

<http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/94029/%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>)

Shortly afterwards, Arzi promised a cash prize to whoever executed Masha'i. He claimed that the president's office chief "has Jewish characteristics" and wished for his death (<http://www.digarban.com/node/2103>). At the height of the conflict between the president and the eulogists, the cabinet filed a complaint with the judiciary against Mansour Arzi and Saeed Haddadian, on charges of insulting the president. The handling of the complaint was prolonged, possibly due to severe power struggles

between the president and the Supreme Leader and the judiciary towards the end of his term in office; eventually, Arzi was merely fined.

Some of the eulogists continued with their political involvement in the recent elections. Thus, for example, the Parsine website claimed that during the election campaign, Seyyed Reza Narimani, one of the eulogists in Tehran, expressed support for Saeed Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, who is supported by the radical Right.

(<http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/123108/%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AD%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AF>)

### The rise in the eulogists' social status at the expense the established clergy

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the eulogists' social status and public influence, especially among society's poor populations and young people. The rise in the eulogists' status is particularly salient in view of the erosion in the status of the established clergy. Unlike the established clergy, who are often associated with Iran's political establishment, the eulogists are more closely associated with the general public and are more aware of its hardships and concerns. They are also considered to be better at mobilizing the general public, thanks to their rhetorical skills and their ability to arouse enthusiasm among the faithful.

In recent years, blogger Taran Reza, a student at the religious seminary in the city of Qom who runs a personal blog about the lives of the students of religion (<http://rezataran.blogfa.com>), addressed the increase in strength of the popular eulogists at the expense of the established clergy. In a post that he published in March 2012, Taran wrote that preachers and people with no religious training who read the Quran are gradually replacing the clergy and are enjoying the social status that was formerly reserved for the clergy. In July 2012, Taran expressed his reservations about the growing status of eulogists and preachers who have no formal religious training. He noted that CDs of various religious preaching are sold throughout the city of Qom, presenting Islam in what he claims is a superficial and insulting manner. He claims that

many eulogists who are not clerics focus on devil worship, Judaism, Freemasonry or Wahhabism as if they bear the brunt of the responsibility for Iran's social problems.

Taran attributes the rise in status of the eulogists to the loss of the contact between the clergy and the Iranian public. In the past, the clergy maintained good day-to-day relationships with citizens, visiting their homes, attending family events and meeting with them regularly. Citizens viewed them as central authority and also supported them financially. Today, many clerics make do with their Friday sermons in mosques and avoid virtually any contact with citizens. Many clerics prefer to appear on television, make speeches at mass meetings, teach courses, set up institutions or engage in management, and this impairs their ongoing contact with citizens. In this situation, the eulogists are replacing them as representatives of the public.

### Expansion of the activity of the eulogists and the religious establishment's criticism of them

Eulogists operate in various frameworks, such as The Council of Islamic Fighters (هیات (رزمندگان اسلام), which operates in scores of cities throughout Iran. Other well-known political eulogists besides Arzi and Haddadian include Hossein Sazur, who is considered to wield influence in the Leader's Office; Hossein Sib Sorkhi; Ahmad Ghadami, a relative of Ahmadinejad who was once head of the security department of Iran's Organization of Municipalities and Rural Councils; Mahmoud Karimi; Ruhollah Bahmani; Mohsen Taheri; Gholam Reza Sazgar; Mehdi Salahshoor; Majid Zadshir; Ahmad Zeynolabedin; and Abbas Heydarzadeh. Some of the eulogists maintain ties with the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij.

(<http://www.digarban.com/%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87/%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%80-%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C>)



Homepage of the website of the Council of Islamic Fighters of Qom, <http://razmandegan-qom.com>

During the past year, the religious eulogists' activity in the context of Iranian involvement in Syria has also been evident. In recent months, a number of Iranian websites have reported that Iranian eulogists such as Hamid Alimi have traveled to Syria to take part in the activities of the Iranian forces participating in the fighting alongside supporters of the Syrian regime.



Preacher Hamid Alimi in Syrian military dress, from:  
<http://www.mashregnews.ir/fa/news/241952> *هی سوردر-یرانی امداحان-ازدی جدری تصاو*

The heads of the Iranian regime and the religious establishment recognize their extensive public influence. This recognition is reflected, among other things, in regular meetings with eulogists by the heads of the regime, led by the Supreme Leader.



**Eulogists at a periodic meeting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei,**  
[http://www.mashreghnews.ir/files/fa/news/1392/2/11/315991\\_821.jpg](http://www.mashreghnews.ir/files/fa/news/1392/2/11/315991_821.jpg)

It is evident that the rise in the status of popular eulogists in recent years is a source of concern in the Iranian religious establishment. Some senior clerics have warned against the spreading of “superstitions” and “Islamic deviations” led by eulogists, some of whom have no formal religious education. In June 2011, senior cleric Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi declared that the public should learn religion from clerics and not from “ignorant eulogists,” whose statements are used by the enemies of Shia against the Shiites

(<http://hawzahnews.ir/index.aspx?siteid=6&pageid=1973&newsview=87842>). At the same time, the conservative media has accused the eulogists of moral and economic corruption and has claimed that they earn very high and unjust salaries.

The religious establishment fears that the activity of popular eulogists and Sufi orders, as well as expressions of popular and messianic Islam, are liable to undermine the status of the clergy and allow interpretation that is independent of the religious establishment. This concern has led, among other things, to restrictions being imposed on the way in which Shi'ite mourning rituals are conducted, such as restrictions on self-flagellation, posting pictures of Shi'ite imams and the use of musical instruments. In addition, the authorities have taken steps against the distribution of CDs with religious content that have not been approved by the authorities. These restrictions are part of a comprehensive campaign by the regime designed to increase supervision of religious expressions that are inconsistent with the “official” interpretation that is acceptable to

the current religious leadership in Iran and with the concept of the rule of the jurisprudent (*velayat-e faqih*).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See in this context: Raz Zimmt, "Islam in the Islamic Republic: the Regime's Struggle to Maintain its Monopoly over Religious Life", Iran Pulse, Issue No. 13 (The Alliance Center of Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, July 19, 2007), <http://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/114-13>