



**The Meir Amit Intelligence
and Terrorism Information Center**

Spotlight on Iran

October 2010—Mehr 1389
Week of September 30-
October 7, 2010



Highlights of the week

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**Another challenge to the Supreme Leader: top reformist cleric
accuses Khamenei of overstepping his authorities**

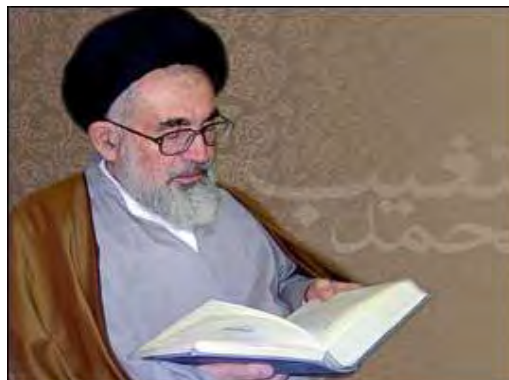
Ayatollah Ali-Mohammad Dastgheib, a top cleric affiliated with the reformist bloc, has recently published on his official website (www.dastgheib.com) a religious ruling challenging the regime's interpretation of the concept of "rule of the religious jurispudent" (*Velayat-e Faqih*), which has been in place since the Islamic revolution.

When asked to provide a religious commentary on that concept, the top cleric argued that one must differentiate between the "absolute rule of the religious jurispudent" and the "religious jurispudent" who is appointed by the Assembly of Experts. According to Dastgheib,

only in some cases, such as the case of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution, can one man be both the “religious jurisprudent” and the “absolute religious jurisprudent”. A top Shi’ite cleric can be an “absolute religious jurisprudent” only if he is recognized to possess the religious authority of “source of emulation” (*Marja’-e Taqlid*). In that case, he enjoys divine authority and has extensive power to manage state affairs as the substitute of the Vanished Imam. On the other hand, a “religious jurisprudent” appointed by the Assembly of Experts under the constitution rather than as a result of his religious authority, has limited power and may only coordinate between the three branches of government and prevent those branches from violating civilian rights. He has no authority with regard to the people and has no right to meddle in civilian affairs. It should be noted that current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was not recognized as possessing the religious authority of “source of emulation” (*Marja’-e Taqlid*) after Khomeini’s death in 1989; Dastgheib’s ruling, therefore, is a challenge to his extensive authorities as Supreme Leader.

Dastgheib went on to strongly criticize the Assembly of Experts, claiming that its duties are not limited to appointing and approving the Supreme Leader. It is supposed to help solve the problems facing the civilians and make sure their rights are upheld. It is inappropriate, the top cleric argued, for the Assembly of Experts to elect a leader and then become a body which obeys him, since by doing so it betrays its mission and its responsibility before God and the Iranian citizens.

In the course of the past year, Ayatollah Dastgheib has become one of the most vociferous critics of the Khamenei-led regime among Iran’s top clerics. When the Assembly of Experts convened after the presidential election, Dastgheib demanded that it investigate the conduct of the regime leaders during the election and the riots that broke out after it, and summon the reformist opposition leaders to present their claims. Last month, Dastgheib refused to take part in an Assembly of Experts’ session. His residence was attacked by a group of government supporters several days later. Dastgheib’s website, as well as the websites of the two top reformist clerics Ayatollah Yousef Sane’i and Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat-Zanjani, have been blocked by the authorities this week.



Source: Dastgheib’s official website

Last month, Mehdi Karoubi, one of the leaders of the reformist opposition, sent a strong-worded letter to Assembly of Experts chairman Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, demanding that the assembly increase monitoring of the Supreme Leader and the bodies under his direct responsibility and stressing that the assembly has the constitutional power to monitor the Supreme Leader and even remove him from power if it finds him unfit for his duties.

Meanwhile, several news websites affiliated with the reformist opposition have reported this week that Khamenei was forced to cancel his scheduled visit to the city of Qom, the center of Iran's religious establishment, after several top Shi'ite clerics refused to welcome him. According to the report, Khamenei was supposed to visit the city over the next several days. Ahead of his visit, the Supreme Leader's office asked the top clerics of Qom to welcome him or at least take part in the sermon he intended to give during his stay there. When that request was refused by some of the top clerics, it was decided to postpone the visit (Jaras, October 2). On the other hand, Fars News Agency cited Qom Friday prayer leader Mohammad Saidi as saying that Khamenei's visit to the city will take place soon and that he will be given a warm welcome by the city residents, the clerics, and the religious seminary students (Fars, October 2).

No more cheap flights: domestic airfares up by 30 percent

Deputy Transportation Minister and director of the Civil Aviation Organization Reza Nakhjavani has announced this week that the High Council of Aviation decided to comply with the requests of Iran's airlines and raise domestic airfares by 30 percent. He said that the price had to increase to bring prices paid by the passengers in line with the actual cost of the flights. The Civil Aviation Organization released an announcement saying that the increased prices will allow the airlines to upgrade their aircraft and provide better quality service to passengers.

Speaking about the issue, the director of one of Iran's airlines said he could not rule out the possibility that air ticket prices will soon increase again following the likely increase in gas prices resulting from the implementation of the subsidy policy reform (Fars, October 3).

As a result of the price increase, a flight from Tehran to Esfahan will cost 45,800 tomans (about 45 dollars), a flight from Tehran to Bushehr will cost 69,000 tomans, a flight from Tehran to Tabriz will cost 49,200 tomans, and a flight from Tehran to Mashhad will cost 66,100 tomans (Fars, October 5).



Airline prices increase, cartoon published by Khabar Online, October 5

Mehr News Agency criticized this week the decision to significantly increase airfare prices and questioned whether it was even legal. According to Mehr, the decision was made even before the implementation of the subsidy policy reform, expected to take place in the coming weeks, and before the issue of illegal airfare increases by Iranian airlines in 2008 has been resolved. The news agency also noted that President Ahmadinejad recently transferred the authority to raise prices from the various government bodies to the Headquarters of Economic Transformation, which handles the subsidy policy reform. Deputy Commerce Minister Mohammad-Ali Zeyghami addressed the issue in an interview granted to Mehr, saying that in light of the sensitive nature of the subject the government will hold a special meeting to discuss the decision to raise the air ticket prices. He stressed, however, that the High Council of Aviation was empowered to make decisions on price increases (Mehr, October 4).

Tabnak, a website affiliated with the pragmatic conservative bloc, also criticized the decision to increase airfare prices by 30 percent, expressing dissatisfaction that no government official announced whether the current increase was caused by the subsidy policy reform or was there another increase coming soon following the implementation of the subsidy policy reform. The website stressed that domestic flights are used mostly by middle class Iranians, who are forced to fly because the underdeveloped railroad system makes it impossible to quickly travel between Iran's remote provinces and the country's center. The decision to raise airfare prices, Tabnak says, will make the lives of many Iranians very difficult, including state employees and students (Tabnak, October 5).

On several occasions in the past several years, Iran's airlines asked the government to increase domestic flight prices, claiming they had barely changed since their last approval by the Majles about six years ago. In light of the government's unwillingness to raise prices, the airlines were forced to reduce the service quality for passengers on domestic flights.

Even as airfare prices increase, this week Iran's railroad company announced a sharp 30-40 percent increase in train ticket prices for the private sector (Mehr, October 4).

Iran's movie industry clashes with Ministry of Islamic Guidance

A serious conflict broke out in recent days between top personalities in Iran's movie industry and the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. The conflict began following the 14th annual film festival held at Tehran's Cinema House on September 16. At a ceremony during the festival, Asghar Farhadi was awarded best director of the year for his film *About Elly*. The film follows the story of an Iranian matchmaker who invites a teacher named Elly to a vacation on the shores of the Caspian Sea in the hope of setting her up with a divorced man who came back to Iran after a stay in Germany. The matchmaker is played by movie star Golshifteh Farahani, who sparked an outrage in Iran in 2008 due to her involvement in the film *Body of Lies*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Russell Crowe. In his acceptance speech, Farhadi criticized the government's policy on culture and cinema, expressing hope that Iran's political situation will eventually reach a point where Iranian filmmakers and actors currently residing abroad will be able to return home and resume their artistic work alongside filmmakers who live in Iran but are limited in their ability to create movies.

In addition to Farhadi's provocative remarks, the authorities were also angered by the appearance at the ceremony of film director Rakhshan Bani-E'temad and her daughter, actress Baran Kowsari, who came to the ceremony wearing a green-colored bracelet and scarf, green being the color of the reformist opposition.

Following the ceremony, Islamic Guidance Minister Mohammad Hosseini voiced strong criticism of the film industry leaders and said that culture figures, artists, and filmmakers should not become involved in political affairs. At a press conference called by Hosseini, he said that it was inappropriate for someone to come on stage wearing a green bracelet one year after the election. He condemned the attempt made by some filmmakers to revive "the dead green movement", saying that attempt was futile. Referring to Farhadi's remarks during the ceremony, Hosseini said that the expectation for anti-revolutionary personalities to come back to Iran to a red carpet reception by the government proved that it was not just about cinema. The problem, said the minister, is with those who seek to systematically undermine Islamic values (Mehr, October 2).



The annual film festival at Tehran's Cinema House, September 16

The Ministry of Islamic Guidance moved from words to action when Javad Shamaqdari, the deputy culture minister of film, said last week that the ministry decided to revoke Farhadi's license to make his new movie. Shamaqdari strongly criticized Farhadi's remarks, saying he would like to apologize to the families of those who sacrificed their lives for the Islamic revolution for the way the annual film festival was conducted (ISNA, October 2).

In response to Shamaqdari's remarks, Cinema House director Mohammad Mehdi Asgarpour sent a strong-worded letter to the minister of Islamic guidance, attacking him and his deputy for their handling of ministry affairs. He accused the minister of being unaware of the art and cinema situation in the country and of having no grasp of the issues under his responsibility. He stressed his loyalty to the Islamic revolution and expressed willingness to compare his contribution to Iran since the Islamic revolution to that of the minister. He also strongly lashed out against Shamaqdari, saying his remarks were a sign of "hysteria". According to Asgarpour, the deputy minister's statement is an attempt to cover up for his failures in promoting the film industry (ISNA, October 1). Asgarpour's letter provoked yet another reaction from Shamaqdari, who accused the Cinema House directors of turning it into a "war room" for the promotion of political goals instead of the interests of the film industry. The Cinema House director's letter, Shamaqdari claimed in his response, was written in a language characteristic of anti-revolutionary elements after the Islamic revolution (Mehr, October 2).

In the wake of the escalating conflict between Asgarpour and Ministry of Islamic Guidance officials, this week over 160 Iranian filmmakers signed a letter in support of the director of Cinema House (Aftab, October 5).

Who has it in for Iran's doctors?

A stun bomb exploded Tuesday at the East Tehran hospital of Al-Ghadir. The bomb was hidden in a hallway on the ground floor of the hospital. Slight damage was caused to the

building as a result of the explosion, but no casualties were reported. Interior security forces who arrived on the scene detained one possible suspect in the explosion (various news agencies, October 5).

The explosion at the Tehran hospital came only two weeks after two doctors from Tehran had been shot dead under mysterious circumstances. On September 21, Dr. Abdol-Reza Soudbakhsh was killed outside of his office in Tehran. Dr. Gholam-Reza Sarabi, a heart surgeon from Tehran, was killed one day later. Two suspects in the killing were detained shortly thereafter. They admitted to murdering him and claimed that they had personal motives for committing the murder. Several days later, Bahman Karimi, the father of one of the murder suspects, committed suicide under unclear circumstances. According to Iran's authorities, he took his own life after trying to escape from internal security forces who attempted to detain him for suspected involvement in the murder.



Dr. Gholam-Reza Sarabi's funeral

Following the death of the two doctors, Iranian top officials, including Deputy Interior Minister Ali Abdollahi, National Security and Foreign Policy Committee chairman Alaeddin Boroujerdi, and top Tehran police official Abbas-Ali Mohammadian, denied any connection between the two incidents or the possibility that the murders had to do with political motives (Mehr, September 26). Sources affiliated with the reformist opposition, however, insinuated that political motives may have played a role in at least one of the murders. Jaras, a website affiliated with reformist opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi, reported that Dr. Soudbakhsh was in charge of treating political prisoners at the Kahrizak detention facility, where at least three of the people detained in the riots which broke out after last year's presidential election died. The facility was shut down in July 2009 on the Supreme Leader's orders, after the authorities were forced to admit that some prisoners were tortured and beaten by wardens. One of the prisoners who died at Kahrizak was the son of the senior advisor of former Revolutionary Guards chief Mohsen Reza'i. According to the Jaras report, Dr. Soudbakhsh refused to comply with the Iranian forensic institute's demand to state that the cause of death was stroke, and concluded that they had died as a result of severe beating. The

website further reported that the doctor was shot dead only one day before he was supposed to leave Iran (Jaras, September 30). In response to those claims, internal security forces chief Esma'il Ahmadi-Moqaddam denied any connection between the doctor's death and the Kahrizak detention facility affair.

Pictures of the week: internal security forces conduct riot control exercise



Photo : Mohammad Hassanzadeh

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Photo : Mohammad Hassanzadeh

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