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Prisoner of opinion: Mohammad Ali Abtahi

By Chibli Mallat



Abtahi, second from right, is seen with other defendants in a courtroom in Tehran, Iran, on August 1.

Mohammad Ali Abtahi cuts a strange figure in a Tehran courtroom. His dazed and almost slurred diction are shocking to those who know him as a lively and humorous man of 51. Instead of his clerical garb and twinkling eyes, we see an unfamiliar figure relating how reformist leaders conspired in advance to condemn June's presidential election as rigged.

Iran's largest pro-reform clerical group, the Association of Combatant Clerics, has condemned the trial of Abtahi and others as a "ridiculous show ... aimed at demoralizing political activists who are against election results and diverting public opinion from crimes committed against detainees."

Mohammad Ali Abtahi is arguably the most senior person on trial. He was chief of staff to President Mohammad Khatami between 1997 and 2001 and then vice president for legal and parliamentary affairs. He resigned in frustration in October 2004 as Khatami's presidency was being undermined in its final year by a conservative majority in the Iranian Parliament.

I followed his career with interest, having been introduced to him in 1997 in Beirut when he was representative in Lebanon of IRIB, the Iranian broadcasting service. This was a time when Khatami had launched his presidential campaign, and I was interested to find out more about the cleric from Yazd. Khatami's relative and a prominent banker, Sayyed Raed Sharafeddin, made the introduction.

Khatami had written two books in Persian, which were impossible to find in Beirut. The Islamic Republic exports carpets and pistachios, occasionally weapons to Hizbullah, but unfortunately few books and none of the great culture

of Persia which were known so much better in Lebanon in the 1930s. Abtahi had Khatami's books on his desk in the Hamra office of Iranian television.

Gentle and polite, he spoke fluent Arabic with a strong Persian accent and was intrigued by the series appearing over a full week in *The Daily Star* ("Khatami, a man amidst the waves"). Soon afterward, he left for a stellar career in Iran, where he became the first Iranian Cabinet member to write an online diary.

Since the end of the Khatami presidency, he developed his blog into something with high intellectual quality as well as being genuinely entertaining. As chairman in Tehran of the Institute for Interreligious Dialogue he has worked to encourage exchange and better understanding between people of different faiths.

Always independent in his thinking, in June's presidential election Abtahi made a different choice than Khatami's - backing Mehdi Karrubi, the former parliamentary speaker, while Khatami supported Mir Hossein Mousavi.

To see him recant in this brutal way just gives a sense of nausea - and speculation as to what physical or mental pressure he has faced. In his groundbreaking 1993 article on "public confession in Iran," Professor Ervand Abrahamian dissected the Stalin-like anatomy of the Iran's political trials, which were repeated in Tehran in the past two weeks: "In a society that attaches importance to personal honor, shame, and martyrdom, these public recantations can utterly devastate the victim's reputation (aberu) - they are tantamount to political suicide."

Abtahi's family denounced the trial, and Khatami pointed out that what we have seen violates the Iranian Constitution, and criticized the court for not allowing defendants' lawyers access to the courtroom or the case files. "The trial on Saturday was a show and the confessions are invalid," he said on a posting on his website. "Such show trials will directly harm the system and further damage public trust."

Rather than producing such public spectacle, Khatami said Iranians expected the government to "confront the problems and tragedies that happened in some detention centers and apparently led to murder."

As for Mohammad Ali Abtahi, we hope soon to again hear his true voice. In the last entry of his blog, he called the elections "a huge swindle ... [some say] a white coup ... more important [serious] than cheating."

That was on 13 June, three days before his arrest. "We should try not to fall," he concluded, with an odd premonition of what was to come.

Gareth Smyth was **The Daily Star's** opinion editor and Iran correspondent for the *Financial Times*. He added to this report. Professor **Chibli Mallat** is the editor of **The Daily Star** law page.