

Thursday, July 30, 2009

Saeed Hajjarian: The brain of reformists

Bete noir of the fundamentalists faces his sternest test

By Gareth Smyth

Prisoners of Opinion



Saeed Hajjarian was arrested at his Tehran home on June 15, 2009, just three days after the disputed presidential election awarded to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with 63 percent of the vote. Amid hundreds recently detained in Iran, Hajjarian, 55, is notable both for his deep influence on the wider reformist movement and for his physical frailty.

Known as the "brain of reformists," Hajjarian was in 2000 shot point-blank in the face as he left Tehran city hall. While his attacker served just two years in prison, Hajjarian has faced a painful daily struggle back from paralysis, undergoing hospital treatment in Iran, the United States and Austria. A rigorous program of daily physiotherapy means he can just about stand. But the hours in speech therapy and on the treadmill did not break Hajjarian's spirit. When I interviewed him in Tehran in 2005, I found him an engaging rather than a miserable man, sanguine about Iran's prospects under Ahmadinejad but just as eager to express his love of poetry and music.

His spirit may now face its sternest test. Hajjarian's lawyer, Gholamali Riahi, has confirmed that his wife, Vajiheh Marsoussi, has seen her husband, but that his medical condition continues to cause concern. The Tehran rumor-mill even at one point suggested Hajjarian had died, and there have also been reports he has suffered a nervous breakdown.

Hajjarian has long been a *bête noire* of the fundamentalists, partly because of his knowledge of the workings of the Islamic state. After taking part in the student seizure of the US Embassy during the 1979 revolution, he became an official in the Intelligence Ministry before becoming a Tehran city councilor, reformist strategist and adviser to Mohammad Khatami after the latter became president in 1997.

Hajjarian made enemies when editing *Sobh-e Emruz*, a newspaper that exposed the role of members of the Intelligence Ministry in the so-called "serial murders" of reformist intellectuals in the late 1990s. It was assumed by many that Hajjarian was himself an important source for articles on the murders, which were written mainly by Akbar Ganji.

It is now commonly supposed in Tehran that Hajjarian could figure in a high-profile trial or possible televised confession designed to link him and other detained reformists to foreign powers in planning unrest after the presidential election.

Ironically, Hajjarian has long been a critic of Western involvement in Iran. In 2005, he told me: "To threaten Iran, nearly every day, America is looking for any excuse – the nuclear issue, terrorism, human rights, the Middle East peace process. There are different US

pressures but some make the situation here more militarized, and in such an atmosphere democracy is killed.”

Indeed, Hajjarian made clear his resolute opposition to sanctions against Iran, ruling out comparisons with apartheid South Africa where “an already strong opposition was boosted.”

Hajjarian’s argument that American pressure helped make the situation “more militarized” reflected the reformist belief that the Bush administration strengthened the influence of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij, an Islamic militia.

Hajjarian was clear that Ahmadinejad’s victory in the 2005 presidential election, while based on genuine popular support and exploiting mistakes made by the reformists, showed both the strength of unelected elements in the Islamic Republic and the fragility of its democracy. Recent events have given added bite to his words of four years ago.

“It’s a question of how entrenched democracy is. If Iran were like France, there would be no problem – [Extreme right Jean-Marie] Le Pen could have got elected and the other parties would have the chance to win next time. Our election [the 2005 presidential election, won by Ahmadinejad] showed a hidden government acting covertly. It’s like a ladder of democracy – of rather semi-democracy – that someone climbs up and then kicks away.”

Ahmadinejad would be less a president, he continued, than the representative of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, in the executive arm. “He won’t even drink water without the leader’s permission.”

Hajjarian now appears to have himself become a victim of the creeping “velvet coup” that he warned about so eloquently.

Many fundamentalists have been calling for the stiffest penalties against those in detention. In a sermon at Friday prayers at Tehran university shortly after the election, Ahmad Khatami, a leading cleric, warned that “agitations, destructive acts, setting fire to mosques and buses, destroying people’s property, creating insecurity and terror, and harassing people” could be considered to be moharebeh (fighting God), a charge that in a stern interpretation of classical Islamic law can carry the death penalty.

Gareth Smyth was the *Financial Times* correspondent in Iran between 2003 and 2007, for which he was nominated foreign correspondent of the year in the British Press Award. He contributed this article to ***The Daily Star***.