

## A March in Tehran

*By Pendar Parsa*

Narratives are what we make to manage complexity, to simplify, to imagine order in chaos, to make sense of our humanness. Once expressed in one form or another, they hold as much grip on the narrator's imagination as on the audience's. Once in charge of a life of their own, they resist possession.

“We are like episodes of *Lost* for the Western onlooker – only images, hard to resist,” he said in a nonchalant tone as if stating the obvious. “Yes,” I thought but didn't say, “or a library of foreign material, selectively translated into easy-to-digest platitudes and poured into sensational pages of memoirs written in the West and for the West – a genre that first animates you and then, moves scrupulously to slice up your individual and social experience, all the while as it makes sure all the traces of agency are sifted and discarded so what's left is remunerative material for a graphic illustration of victims of injustice and tyranny all doomed to anger, hate and despair.”

Seventy-odd days have passed, but this single note, my prize from a conversation on a balmy Tehran evening, in its complex simplicity and in disproportionate ways I did not anticipate, continues to compose my repertoire of reactions to everything ‘political’ coming from the Middle East. My moments, just like olfactory complexity, have had a base, a middle and a top note. There has been apathy on one extreme, shame and anxiety in the middle, and inexplicable hope and solid confidence in social and political possibilities on top. The world without Bin Laden bears the lightness of existence, but rather than tie my international law bootstraps to join the crowd clearing throats over whether war knows boundaries or not, if it was self-defense or law enforcement, plain assassination or permissible targeted killing, I stay aloof

in the face of what my interlocutor in Tehran would perhaps count as yet another graphic cause for entertainment. Likewise with Arab Spring – it is hard to breathe in the breeze of yearning for freedom without the hypocritical odor of ‘reset’ US Middle East policy, or without thinking of the endless possibilities of revolution going awry in Egypt.

To speak of the encounter as a narrative, I fear, one will have to endure shame, as any presentation of such deep impression will inevitably involve some sort of objectification of my interlocutor and company akin to *Lost*. How could one set out to write of folks who read *Lolita* -- and beyond -- in Tehran differently from what we were once told in a loud memoir, without purporting another objectification? Counter-examples don’t just negate examples, they validate the discourse. How would one avoid either reductionism or generalization in speaking of young, religious or secular, political minds, who are theoretically as skeptical about Islamic democracy as those who advocate a secular democratic Iran, yet find realism in walking the walk and talking the talk of socio-political and legal reform of the existing boundaries? If former President Khatami’s recent invitation to forgiveness does not enrage my interlocutors as much as it does their compatriots outside, it might be because they are under less illusion about international criminal institutions, or because they know better than dwell on what is no more than rhetoric, or yet because they have cooked up enough maturity on the political grill of current internal rift and chaos in the Iranian government to have a sense of their living options.

But then again, I might be projecting here. Before I lose sight of the shame of foisting my psyche into my interlocutors – my fears, despair, cynicism, mistrust, rage, and all that the privileges of the ‘Free World’ allow me to entertain more frivolously compared to those who have to constantly make and face decisions on the ground – let me own up to reading my own optimism in my interlocutors’ mirror. Optimism, after all, might read as a word with a

single definition, naivety, in the contemporary Iranian politics dictionary. In the summer of 2009, our stirred-up emotions and intellect proudly celebrated absence of violence and the dawn of widespread civil resistance. Two years later, it would be self-delusional to walk through the same streets that brought the 2009 nonviolent protests to life, observe the public's day-to-day social business, and still sing praise to a society for its moral progress to denounce violence. Violence and repression of self and of the other do not just go away, and specially, when deeply housed in a complex, collective social psyche, they do not go away quickly through turbulent times. And even if they do, crisis and post-crisis euphoria or agony are certainly no prime time to make felicitous conclusions about a people overcoming their ills.

What, then, warrants so much optimism about democratic potentials of a country whose political climate is unpredictable as, well,, a country sandwiched between the benevolent imperialism of its nemesis and an impossible combination of its own by-now-overly-exposed domestic power struggle and its regional ambitions?

Almost a shock to my own participatory democratic sensibilities, for me the horizon of political possibilities in today's Iran is defined by the richness of socio-political consciousness of a small, but robust, cadre of young, elite intellectuals. A sample of these voices treated me to a conversation of hope in March, which I have since feared might lose its power if captured in my words. A narrative projecting the vibrance of these minds, I have been wary, will carry on with a life of its own, perhaps dispossessing me of the single meaning I have taken away from it -- an open path to promises of possibilities for political change.

A narrative about voices that are rarely noted in the image-focused political reportage on Iran also runs the risk of further particularizing the already particular – portraying ordinary experiences of intellectual discourse as extraordinary – in a way that the presented

picture winds up reaffirming the Western imagination of the other as exotic. This is true more about my female interlocutors than about their male counterparts, as it is true more about religious than secular minds. It is as though the bar about women and religious intellectuals inside Iran has been lowered so much that any glimpse of insight they may offer deserves publicity.

Yet this conversation and what it says about the consciousness of young, Iranian elite intellectuals – those who are ultimately relevant in the context of political movements that will shape the present and future of Iranian politics -- is extraordinary precisely in its ordinariness and needs no further qualification beyond its own tone.

Let's step aboard and walk to the small crowd to hear it directly:

It is a cool Sunday evening, right before Norooz when nothing but excitement has filled the streets of Tehran – that time of the year when kindness among strangers doesn't beg second-guessing. Politics has no place in the cheery mood of March, except when inflation irks the New Year's shoppers and suddenly talking politics becomes a way of living for a nation that finds itself adequate in wisdom when it comes to economics.

I am on an exhausting quest after elusive answers to the usual 'what ifs', this time around, toying with scenarios of connecting with both my own professional generation, now mostly established, and with the blossoming legal intellectuals a decade younger – what would it be like to be at the heart of the politics of elite Iranian universities as a graduate student or as a recent graduate?

We have agreed to meet at the House of Artists – a complex of galleries, theatres, and green scenery attractive to young intellectuals and artists -- downtown Tehran, both for its ambiance and for the privacy we hope it affords. I was last here to hear Richard Rorty tell his Iranian audience that their democracy is, and ought to be, different, but that liberal democracy is the

ultimate form anyway. And one time before last, here I was to learn again what a broken heart looks like. I can't tell which experience hurt more.

Delayed by late arrivals Iranian-style, privacy also becomes an illusion. The café is too loud for us to carry a quiet conversation, and if we speak loud enough to be audible, we can't be sure we will still say what we would say otherwise. So a park outside is the next try. But soon I learn that there are bigger fears than spying unwanted ears in our way -- a street cat, which propels one of my interlocutors to uncompromisingly veto our choice of a park bench. We finally agree to settle in one of our companions' nearby apartment.

A brief review of anonymity business – using *nom de guerre* and otherwise discretion to forestall identification by content – before going around for introductions: Mahour (f) LL.M. student, intellectual property, U. of Tehran; Ava (f, LL.M. student, criminal law, U. of Tehran; Yasna (f) MA student, political science, U. of Tehran; Siavash (m), LL.M., human rights, U. of Tehran; Roozbeh (m), LL.B., U. of Tehran; Nima (m), LL.M. student, intellectual property, U. of Tehran; and Bahar (f), doctoral student, public law, U. of Tehran. There is a tittering laugh as the pseudonyms come out, and I think, under social conditions where switching identities is as effortless as switching the light on and off, real names perhaps still carry more meaning than one would imagine.

I have walked in with a stack of puzzles, not on the details of day-to-day political life which often attract analysts beyond borders, but on the general contours of Iran's contemporary image which evade me in different ways as I step inside and outside the borders. Iranian politics is like an old lover whom you can't quite trust when you're away from, but eerily feel at ease with when you are by her side. I pull a card at random to see where it takes us and ask about the complexity of power relations utterly masked by the hoo-ha of international focus on Iran.

The group prods Nima – whom they amusingly point to as an encyclopedia – but he declines and Siavash, who later turns out to be of a leadership type, begins:

“Look, don’t take this as a beginning to a postmodern rambling about metaphor and reality – that’s not my interest. But I want to say that the graphic presentation of the other, -- of Iran, of Egypt, of Libya – is in line with what the West wants to make of it: amusement. Graphic presentation plus some elements of human rights language and prestige and you’ll have the food the Western viewer craves.”

He has internalized familiar accusations so deeply that he is obliged to shoot for a preemptive defense:

“I don’t quite believe in conspiracy theories, but the American society clearly cannot go on without finding, making, and making-up enemies. That said, Muslims have not left a clean record in the past few years either. The result is a mishmash in which images have replaced one another – reality has become fiction and fiction reality. Lost in all this are real souls – those who are sacrificed physically or psychologically. This fantasy world of images is attractive to the West but has nothing to do with our lives.”

Yasna finds my question too confining and follows:

“It’s not only the Iranian power relations that remain underrecognized, but the complexity of the Iranian society in general. When we say they don’t get us, we need to be clear who is ‘they’. We might be speaking of theoretically-oriented analysts or media people. The first group, it seems to me, is too enveloped and invested in its theoretical assumptions, which do not quite fit our societies. This is not exclusive to Iran – it’s about the Middle East and the South in general. That’s why, on occasions, when homegrown intellectuals rise up to speak to socio-political issues, their theoretical lenses can capture the inner workings of their societies much more

effectively. As to the media people, I just don't expect much. Today's journalism is too superficial to get to the depth of social issues in their specific contexts."

Bahar brings it home:

"You are all blaming others for short-sightedness. I don't think we know the nooks and crannies of power relations ourselves either. Most of the time, our answer is no more than our best guess about the power structure here. Example: former President Hashemi – some say he's the true man of power and can impact the system in whatever way he fancies; some think he's lost the once-upon-a-time full -fledged control; and some think him shrewd enough to still be able to chime in last minute and change the game on any deal if he so wishes. There's no transparency here."

Contrary to old democracies you mean?

"No, actually just like old democracies – behind-the-door games are global," she continues "but the gap is larger here because on the one hand our power structure is more complex and on the other hand transparency is more meager – the two reinforce one another."

Yasna, the only voice with political science training finds this much of self-resignation disconcerting:

"I think we are talking about two different phenomena. What's going on behind the scenes is one thing and a general understanding of power structure is another. It's difficult, and perhaps increasingly more difficult after the 2009 election, to know what's really going on among those who are inside the circle – what, for instance, Rahim Mashaei [Ahmadinejad's most controversial ally] is up to and what his actual leverage is. But there are other parts of the puzzle – exactly the evolution of power structure – that we as insiders do understand but they remain beyond the reach of outsiders: questions such as Hashemi's move from a position competing

with the reformist candidate in the 2005 Presidential election and now in 2009 backing the reform movement; or, Mousavi's evolution from Khomeini's Prime Minister to the voice of reform in 2009, one of whose messages is reforming the Constitution."

Roosbeh articulates the complexity in a different way:

"Part of the problem has been orientalism in different forms when it comes to Islamic studies. But there's an increasing number of native scholars who are trying to come up with proper methodology to portray the context of societies under their study. That, to a great extent, could address the problems associated with insufficient understanding of our society. But the more perplexing factor about Iran is that it's neither a traditional nor a modern society. We don't have modern institutions: Majles is not really a parliament in all its features, just as our presidency is not like modern presidency with all its powers and restrictions. But we don't have traditional institutions either – this isn't by any stretch of imagination an Islamic state. Not much of what the government does, in its relation to people or in its operation of economy, is even in conformity with Islamic jurisprudence. Then to this in-between position, add other factors such as totalitarian tendencies, ideological tensions, and oil revenue which only pile up more layers of competition over power."

What about political consciousness in the public, I ask. As a small group of young, elite minds, who are in touch with the public, how much of daily life in your view is politicized from the public's perspective? Has political consciousness been on the rise in recent years?

Mahoor is skeptical:

"I think if you leave aside some of the historically significant events such as the 1979 Revolution, precisely because of the gap we were speaking about, people are not involved in politics and do not demand transparency either. There are no private television and radio

channels. Newspapers had a mushroom-like growth with Khatami's presidency but with the decline of media's freedom, their popularity eclipsed too. From what we hear about Egypt, even in villages people read a daily paper. Not here. We don't have that level of involvement."

But we do better economically, don't we?

"Yes, but Egyptians have a set of old-rooted institutions, cultural and religious ones, that have continued to shape people's relation to politics – they've cultivated some level of awareness, if not necessarily participation. We don't have any of that – we don't have any effective civil, even religious, institutions that could have an impact on the elections for instance, and at the same time could interact with people directly too. I think the main problem lies in lack of effective institutions – institutionalized social actors."

Ava's concern goes beyond institutions – it's about pluralism, culture of citizenship and responsibility:

"The more ideas, individual choices, individualities, and institutions a society accommodates, the more dynamism and renewal it can expect. Let me use religion as an example. What happened in the 2009 election was a happy outcome -- fundamental assumptions that people had long lived with broke down. I come from a religious, but in no way closed-minded or uneducated, Family. But even someone with my background had lived for twenty-something years with dogmas..."

Like?

"Start with very simple ones such as the character of such and such politicians, to many more. I never questioned any of that before this last election. After the election, many of us have had to return to every single belief we had so firmly held on to and reassess all of them – read, reread, think, doubt, and doubt at a fundamental level, something none of us had anticipated or done before."

What about culture?

“We’re in no shortage of cultural problems. But the most important one, I think, is hypocrisy – multiple faces and identities people adopt and walk with on a daily basis; and this has consequences in political life too. What Mousavi did in this last election – and what matters to me from a cultural viewpoint regardless of its political implications – was that he addressed citizens as individuals – each citizen as an ambassador, as media. We had never been addressed as individuals, as individual citizens, in this way before. Let me use an example: look at all the finger-pointing and unkindness when people try to get ahead while driving – as though they’re disconnected entirely from the person in the car as a real person in flesh. These same people in this culture actually hold the door for each other and do a lot more in the way of social courtesy norms while walking next to someone, or interact face-to-face. Personhood and constant awareness of it do matter. What I really heard in this last election, not just as a slogan but as a way of a candidate connecting with each individual citizen, was that you do matter, and I’m addressing you. It brought a sense of responsibility. All other previous elections manipulated people’s emotions, and finally for the first time, someone spoke to us. I have no doubt that political intelligence has had a considerable growth, not across the nation as a whole, but among many groups of people – a sense of responsibility, citizenship responsibility if you will, to educate oneself and others. This in and of itself, if continued and successful, will reduce the gap between the sources of power and people.”

Siavash takes issue with my question as a normative one. Judging about the level of political consciousness, he says, would have to define what political consciousness is, and that’s already subject to dispute:

“I think a more useful and accurate way of understanding of how people relate to politics is to say that Iranians are politicized, that is, they see a great deal of their daily life in a politicized form. This is so, I think, more now than any other time in the Iranian history and also more prominent here than in other nations. For the past one hundred years, social, political, and economic problems have been considered by intellectuals to be as large as the power of the government – there are problems where there is government, so the blame is on the government and the solution is in change, changing the government. Ever since the Constitutional Revolution, intellectuals have constantly been after change of power structure to take over the resources to use in the interest of social, political and economic reform. The government also has been in control of oil revenue, military and trade, an omnipresent in a totalitarian fashion, so large that no matter what you do and where you go, you’re facing it. In business, you can’t exceed a certain limit without having to deal with rent-seekers of power and money. In academic life, you face ideological control. Then, the totalitarian government throws its shadow over your private life more and more – your drinking in private, your going to movies with your girlfriend, the style you wear your hair, every single mundane activity. If the Iranian society is politicized, it’s not because people have their eyes set on power, but because the government is in your face from the moment you wake up in the morning; because where ever you step, you’re stepping on the government’s tail. So if Iranian people and events are so much politicized, it’s for two reasons: because elites have tried to change the governments of their time, time and again, to share in the resources for the sake of reform, and because the totalitarian function of the government follows people everywhere and inevitably calls them into politics. And these two reinforce one another.”

Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

“Initially a good thing – it has brought along change after change. But its downside is that we as a people have become politicized. We have historically lived under the assumption that the answer to our problems is in change of the government. The 1979 Revolution was just that too – the problem is Shah and all would turn well if the Shah is kicked out. Now 32 years later, we know better. We are under no illusion that with a regime change, our social, cultural, civil, economic, and political problems would just go away. We have learned that change of government by itself only brings cosmetic change.”

Mahoor challenges the comparison between 1979 and today:

“In 1979, there was unity, the nation was politicized then too, but everyone wanted the Shah out. Now there’s nothing like unity. Egyptians had unity in their goal, we don’t.”

Siavash finds the Egyptian’s unity in their fight against economic and political corruption – something that is not the primary concern of the majority of Iranians:

“Our concern is more democracy now than economic corruption. In our history, we have never had any particular class who would see itself as a beneficiary of democracy. The Bazaar found it to be more beneficial to ally with the Shah, as did the clergy. Now for the first time, there is a particular group on the scene, small but existent, of middle class urban citizens who long after civil and political rights. On one side, there’s the increasing number of young university students who are after political rights, and then there are average youth who demand simple, but essential, civil and social rights. The combination of these two makes up a new group, who for the first time is trying to come up with attractive packages of democratic benefits to persuade other groups about reform. That’s how the reform campaign of 2009 took shape.”

Mahoor retorts that there are in fact all these other groups in rural areas, the economically disadvantaged, who see no good in joining the movement.

Siavash concedes:

“Agreed. That’s why the 2009 reform didn’t go where it should have. The point is that for the first time, there’s a group who finds much at stake in democracy, and is working hard to convince other groups that there’s something for everyone in a democratic process. Look, we’ve had a bitter, costly historical experience, revolution and then war. No-one wants to go there again.”

Yasna acknowledges more political intelligence in this new middle class:

“What’s happened is that in the voices for change, we don’t hear a cry of change of government as a response to tangible, immediate problems – change the government and economy will fix itself, that sort of illusion. Yes, we’re politicized ever more but this new middle class who advocates democratic ideas has grown up and outgrown any rosy ideas of regime change. But the group is infinitely small, and its connection to the majority of people negligible. So yes, among a nation of highly politicized people, there’s a small group of those who have acquired political understanding too, but they are small in number and limited in their connections.”

What about the internet and social networks, I ask Yasna, could they bridge the gap? Do they have any considerable role in forming social movements? She believes, with stronger cyber connections, socio-political consciousness would have been more informed. Siavash disagrees:

“I think actually the internet hurt the 2009 movement a lot more than it helped. It made the whole thing sentimental, sensational, and pure fantasy. Reform-minded folks had done a lot already in the way of networking. There was all this organizational work since 1997 [When former President Khatami came to power) – a lot of civil society networks, youth centers, political party organizations. This was political interaction, and all the hype about internet changed it into a sensational drama. Political action in which dialogue was a living possibility

became a drama space in which dialogue had no place because everything was about emotions and no more. Think of the case of Neda, for instance. What Neda's portrayal did was to create drama of the sort Americans with their knack for creating good and evil, freedom-loving and fundamentalist, like to watch. We were all living together here. We obviously did have problems with religious fundamentalists but dialogue between us wasn't such an impossibility – we didn't hate each other like what's going on today.”

Yasna makes a distinction:

“So far as Iranians are concerned, I think what you say about dramatization of 2009 is true about Iranians living abroad – those who either do not wish or are unable to return. For them, these images immediately translate into emotions, call it nostalgia, helplessness, or anything of that sort. For people who pour into the streets and face violence every moment, internet in fact has helped reduce the gap between different groups in different cities – Tehran has become closer to smaller, more remote cities because of cyber connections.”

Siavash mentions all the modes of connections outside cyberspace, which were not targeted by the government crackdown as much. Before Facebook, all these civil society organizations were able to connect in ways that the government was not able to shut down so easily as all the crackdown on the internet. He goes on:

“Another positive change, which started after the 1979 Revolution, but in fact was strengthened after the Iran-Iraq War, was that we as a nation began to throw away conspiracy theories against foreign intervention and replaced all of that with a sense of responsibility. Historically, not just the public, but our foreign-educated elites also had been in the business of finding scapegoats for almost every domestic issue – it was either the Brits and later the Americans. At the end of the war, people faced a country that had been totally damaged and began to think of ways to fix it

without the whole psychology of blame. One of the things we realized then was that our society as a whole was a violent society. The war had cultivated and nourished violence in us as individuals. The after-war generation, those who had lost parents in the war, began to think of violence as a serious social ill. It's been a process over a decade or two to figure this out and to stand against it, and this did not come from the books or intellectuals; it came from those who had gone through the Revolution and the war and from their children's experiences. It came from all who had been hurt by violence, by intolerance, and by ideological manipulation of religion. People gradually woke up and realized our problems are not rooted in a foreign enemy, but in our social ills. We may not have resolved it all, but the fact that this has become a concern now, a social and intellectual occupation, is a huge step compared to the overarching conspiracy theories of our previous generations. The rising urban middle class, which I just mentioned, in fact is working on this. Granted, it's a small group of the population, but they are networking through the increasing body of university students, through internet and by other means to offer democratic packages with cultural, social and economic ideas for other groups – ideas that are not necessarily political. This group is targeting social ills and is after domestic change bottom-up.”

Bahar picks up here with her own experience:

“I want to emphasize again on the role of 2009 election in changing our mental structure and system of beliefs. Coming from a religious and educated family myself, it was only with this last election that I began to cast doubt on my entire system of beliefs, going through them one by one to figure out what comes from the government propaganda, what comes from my family, and what I do believe in personally. One way that I think internet contributed to this transformation was that it provided a forum to share sentiments and inner thoughts of this process – a support

network during the depression that many of us experienced after all the disappointment of 2009. I don't think internet access has necessarily made people more educated in politics. I come from a family that reads and keeps up with politics, and internet may have only made it faster or easier. But internet access in no way has urged those who never cared to follow politics now to suddenly become active or educated."

Bahar has to burst everyone's bubble now:

"What worries me is that we are all sitting here and assuming what we say applies to the whole nation. There's a gap, my friends, and a big one, between us, the so-called intellectuals, and the public. We all speak Persian, but we don't speak the same language – we don't get each other. And yet we're sitting here pontificating about the past, present and future of Iranian politics."

I wonder if this is the level of self-awareness in a young, educated scholar who is in close contact with her society, how could my compatriots abroad who have lost all sorts of connections except some vacation times back home, cultural rituals, or else what media feed them feel so comfortable and confident in their daily pontifications?

Roozbeh poses another challenge:

"I have a fundamental problem with the assumption you're all entertaining here. I don't think it's either necessary or desirable for the public as a whole to reach the same level of political consciousness. The reason we've become a politicized nation is that we don't have sufficient political and civil institutions and so ordinary people have been drawn into what ought to be elites' game. I do believe in the role of elites. Today, we have an outstanding group of intellectual elites – diverse in their opinions but clearly learned – who actually was able to stand for its role through recent events. This group lacks two essential elements to continue to be

effective, however: a central organization and proper, professional media to connect with the public.”

Bahar interrupts by clarifying that although it would be obviously unrealistic to hope for equal distribution of political education, an elitist approach runs the risk of miscalculation. Siavash’s optimism about a general and growing enthusiasm for democracy is one of those miscalculations – it is just so disconnected from real people and their demands.

Ava tries to find a middle way:

“In many successful social and political movements, the spark starts in one place and then it spreads. Look at Egypt, look at the Islamic Revolution which began in Tehran first. I don’t think an entire nation needs to get involved in the beginning of a movement. That said, I’m uneasy with the word elite and with the concept as a whole. What happened in 2009 wasn’t run by elites. Those who came to the streets were middle class folks.”

Finally, someone speaks of an ideal future. Yasna continues:

“For me, an ideal society is one in which democracy is a method of living not a goal. If a society reaches that point, then sharp differences in political awareness become a question for further education and not a tool for elites to take over and run the show. So awareness is important to the extent that it helps the society reach consensus about democracy as a method.”

Siavash reminds everyone that all our modernist leaders have been from the elite class, but at the same time they have been benevolent dictators too. So we have enough historical memory to be suspicious of elites.

I ask about religion and what they think its role, realistically speaking, will be in the Iranian society and politics a few decades from now -- what’s their ideal scenario and if that ideal comports with what they observe today. Ava repeats her conviction that the 2009 election

suddenly woke up many to the incompatibility of religion with democratic politics. And this is important because these are educated, religious men and women with strong convictions. The 2009 election shook up the foundations of religious thought in politics.

Yasna has to make another distinction:

“Let’s be clear. Religion will not disappear from the Iranian society, period. And there is absolutely no reason for it to disappear. An Islamic state is a different story – we’re not quite one right now either. Fact is, the government has closed the profile of Islamic government by its own hands, once forever. As though Iranian people owed the clergy a debt, and they’ve paid it upto the last penny in the past 32 years -- we’re debt-free for good!”

Laughter! She continues:

“Religion, although losing its color for many in reaction to the totalitarianism of a government who goes so far as to peer through your closed curtains, will still stay for many others. Islam might be replaced with something else. Look around and you’ll see all these weird sects of mysticism, New Ageism, and cults that people seek refuge in these days. So there will surely be changes on the religion scene. But there will also still be a group who have a lot at stake in a religious state so will defend it at any cost – their existence and flourishing depend on it.”

Ava extends that sense of totalitarianism to the religious people in general. There are a group of religious people who actually believe they have guardianship over the whole society.

Yasna continues:

“Religious state has in fact exacerbated that sense of intolerance, the sense of I-know-it-all. These folks are so accustomed to seeing what they want to see. They’re used to see women in their approved versions of hijab, they’re use to streets without bars, they’re used to hearing the call for prayers at noon, they’re use to their noontime prayer break at work. Now try to take all

of that away, and they see themselves as good and you as evil. On the other side are those who have suffered through all this and are done with all of that, with changing identities and hypocrisy.”

Roosbeh is skeptical that there will be a day in the Iranian society when religion is only part of custom and lose its sacrosanct status. Siavash continues:

“Yes, but even in a religious society, there’s a secular order needed. There’s the religion of Khamenei and Mesbah and the religion of intellectuals like Soroush. But there’s no choice other than airing all these interpretations and let people pick what works for them. Also, when we speak of religion and modernity, we miss an important fact in this complexity. Today, there rules this particular group who is charmed by some aspects of modernity, its modernism to be exact, is after military power and everything that technology brings and uses all of that as promises in its election campaigns too. But they’re at the same time afraid of other elements of the same modernity – human rights and such. This simultaneous enchantment and fear is actually not so innocent – it’s the beginning of fundamentalism. So the problem is not in ordinary religious people – they will need a secular order and have less reason to oppose it. The main problem that threatens our own society as much as it does the world is fundamentalism. We are just as concerned about and as vulnerable to this version of fundamentalism that adopts one part of modernity and leaves out the other as Americans, as Europeans and as the rest of the world are.”

Yasna moves to the future of fundamentalism:

“The interesting question is to see when and if it comes to a point of making a choice, where the traditional or conservative religious people who are nevertheless not necessarily fundamentalists stand – whether they’ll prefer a democratic order in which they’ll be free to practice their

traditional religion or they will side with fundamentalists. At this point, the Iranian government is having fun with the nuclear issue, and using it strategically to get ahead on the international games – and actually it’s scoring very well so far as games are concerned. But the scary scenario is to imagine if there is no Islamic Republic of Iran government and the folks with fundamentalist tendencies lose to a different order, how they’re going to use the power and resources they have accumulated and what that will mean for global order.”

Siavash adds another concern against nuclear power:

“Half of the national budget is going into military, and all the international hype aside, military expenses are hurting the economy, development and culture. Deterrence is not a good enough reason to want atomic bomb. The world runs on engagement, not deterrence. Besides, foreign threat aside, what government has been saved against its own people through nuclear power? A nuclear war is a zero-sum game. This is neither economical nor useful as deterrence – and deterrence is not limited to nuclear capability. I’m afraid this may not be merely a strategic game. If fundamentalists have to persuade the religious factions of the society to go with their plans, they will use the return of the Twelfth Imam, Mahdi, and that’s a point where traditional religion could meet their fundamentalism.”

Ava adds another layer:

“The point is that power is now wildly divided – something hard to see from outside. There are a few factions, each with its own dangerous ideological system. And these folks have been cooking up plans – they don’t sit idle in the face of other groups. These ideologies are not necessarily all religious or traditional, and facing one another in an irrational battle of power, it’s very hard to predict how they’re going to use their resources. That they may actually bring in

someone and introduce as Mahdi is not just paranoia; it may happen and if it does it's hard to stop the ordinary religious people from joining their club.”

We're having a good time trying our hands at the behind-the-scene politics and imagining its future. But I turn the question to human rights and ask about the West's focus on the Iranian record and the role of our own activists. I wonder if we have picked the right strategies inside and how the group reads the implications of those strategies as reflected in the international response.

Yasna's reaction is a bit out of control:

“This is something that actually bothers me beyond measure. As I mentioned before, the West looks at us from its own standpoint. Case in point is Sakineh Ashtiani. I think she became the most controversial face of Iran. All this Kurdish population doomed in jail for years get zero attention and Sakineh Ashtiani is taken to represent our deepest problems. That's because stoning in the Western consciousness is the most dramatic of crimes.”

Who is responsible for that kind of imbalanced attention? Our own activists, the Western imagination, or else?

“Look, I expect next to nothing when it comes to the Western defense of human rights. The West can go ahead and defend the rights of Iranian animals if it so wishes. It is not like that I expect them to do something to improve our situation – I close my eyes on any intention of assistance beyond our borders; these are our problems and we're in charge ourselves. But I do feel disappointed that they invest their energy in the wrong place. They have the media to publicize and when they publicize what is of interest to them, the rest gets ignored. Then everyone forgets that there is a Kurdistan which is a prison itself, and it has been so for years.”

The optimist Siavash is at it again:

“What human rights did for us was that it gave us a new language to communicate and to connect. What was considered a luxury before is now a tool, a language to speak with ourselves and with the world. As the government encroached on the rights of citizens more and more, the question was no longer merely civil and political rights. Basic social, economic and cultural rights were infringed, and the language of human rights became increasingly important to frame these violations and to communicate them. Also, in an ideological society, we had been taught to all become one. The language of human rights was instrumental to teach divergence and pluralism.”

He then raises an objection to my questions:

“I was going to suggest that your questions also fail to target the most important of our issues. You are obviously going to narrate this for the Western audience. But for our purposes, the simple vocabulary of human rights such as rejection of violence, or religious tolerance is at the core of our concerns.”

So you think there’s some value in the structure of this language, I ask.

“Absolutely, I think this has given us a language to speak, to reach out, and to try to understand one another. Our goal has to be to present democratic packages which appeal to those who don’t think like us and to be able to speak to them.”

Yasna, the skeptic, challenges Siavash’s use of ‘us’ as a society and speaks again of the gap between different groups in terms of the usefulness of this language.

Bahar invites the group to come back to the earth:

“I wish I could be so optimistic. I often think that in fact violence is so much embedded in people’s daily lives right now that it would be an elite’s fantasy to say that the society has

reached a point to reject violence with the language of human rights. We're talking about people who could easily show a knife in a petty argument over a parking spot."

And the intellectual discourse is not so much different, Roozbeh adds:

"Our intellectuals do not speak or write in the language of tolerance either. There's little tolerance for opposing arguments. In the intellectual community, this in itself has become a concern for those who are more self-aware."

Siavash is still defending his ideal as a prospect well within sight and highlights the difference between today's Iran and Iran of 1979, when Bahar makes it personal:

"I'm a lawyer, a scholar, and have given talks about a violence-free society many times. But as I was going home on this past February 14 [another day of street protests] and looking at the protests and those who were beating up the people, I suddenly asked myself what I would do if I had power over these thugs. What would I do as a judge in a system where these people stand trial – will I be able to proceed in fairness and respect the law? If I'm not absolutely sure about myself, how could I be certain about people who may never have heard of procedural fairness or those who have lost their loved ones under the tyranny of these thugs?"

This leaves an instant impression on the group. Ava adds:

"I agree that there are cultural roots to violence. But this government is actually manipulating that to its own advantage. It's arming teens against people without any regard to how that will impact people's normal day-to-day social interactions. If this continues and we are subject to this longer, who knows what we – even the so-called educated elite – will do when there's a turn of events and we're in a power position."

I ask about the images of militiaman with a motorcycle set on fire or one Basiji who was fallen into people's hands and treated mercifully – what in the summer of 2009 we so triumphantly

cheered as evidence for the maturity of Green Movement and its opposition to violence. Was that all juvenile fantasy then?

The group thinks the supporting voices behind the Green Movement in the West are giving a fancy presentation of the movement including the elimination or reduction in violence to get support from the West for the Movement. Alternatively, they're just either armchair academics or folks in Diaspora and present their ideal Iran for the real Iran as a way of dealing with their own nostalgia. That said, it would still be fair to say that among those who make up the body of the Green Movement, the middle class urban population, there has been a significant realization that violence is a social ill. So although we've not gotten rid of the social ill completely yet, we know we must, if this is a truly civil resistance movement.

Siavash has to end with another hopeful note:

“Also, although self-defense is not an apt framework, one would have to consider where and how violence was used. At the time of the 1979 Revolution, people poured into the streets all on fire, and mercy and sympathy were exceptions. But in 2009, 3 million people were marching on the streets of Tehran, originally all out to protest peacefully and only resorted to violence where there was no other recourse. Where does this come from? Many of our intellectuals lean towards the Left and in fact would advocate the overthrow of the regime at any cost – just like many of the opposition groups in exile. The architects of the Green Movement arose from the heart of tradition and religion – Ayatollah Montazeri, Mousavi himself, Mohsen Kadivar. If one could identify Khatami with Western education, with the leaders of the Green Movement one would be hard-pressed to discern any affiliation with the West or Western ideas as such.”

Yasna uses an example from people's calls to BBC Persian:

“A few days before Egyptians called it a Revolution of victory, BBC was taking calls from Iranians on the Egyptian events. A large majority of callers were sending messages to Egyptians to be cautious in their treatment of Mubarak. Don’t do to him what we did to Bakhtiar. This goes a long way to show how far we’ve come along to realize the answer is not in violence. But to what extent we can practice what we believe when we are in a decisionmaking position is an entirely different question.”

We have to wrap up. They ask Nima the Encyclopedia to sum up the discussion as is apparently customary for the gang, jokingly comparing him to the elite who let the masses get down on the dirt as they meditate on either *ex ante* abstractions or *ex post* critique! He has been suspiciously quiet. If he was hearing what I was, perhaps his mind is racing where mine is – far into a future that does not yet exist, and far back into the past that we wish did not exist.

The spiral of hope and despair, boldness and caution, enthusiasm and cold feet, forgiveness and resentment, and imagination and cold calculation in the text is open to multitude of readings. The subtext, however, reads a single message to me: a movement that is made up of voices as nuanced as the melody echoed into my ears in an evening orchestra cannot be on a wrong path. The destination could be as uncertain as it was in 1979, but this time around the reward is in the ride itself.