

Lost History of Iran's 1981 Coup

The U.S. mainstream media avoids the word "coup" when a disfavored leader is ousted, but the silence around Iran's 1981 coup also may have served Ronald Reagan's political self-interest in keeping secret his own "coup," as Mahmood Delkhasteh reflects.

By Mahmood Delkhasteh

Brazil's suspended President Dilma Rousseff calls her impeachment a coup d'état. Many academics and political experts agree that the old guard and corrupt capitalist elite in Brazil have overthrown the president, despite the fact that all the legal procedures for her impeachment have been observed. As one pro-Rousseff Brazilian protester remarked, this is a "civilian coup – capitalism doesn't need guns and soldiers; it is enough to have an anti-democratic judicial system."

Now go back 35 years to Iran. The 1979 Iranian Revolution is less than two-and-a-half years old. The clergy have, gradually, monopolized the state. The aim is, as the head of the Islamic Republic Party (Ayatollah Beheshti) has stated, to establish a "despotism of the pious." The only remaining obstacle to the total monopolization of power is the office of the recently elected president, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. He insists upon defending the democratic goals of the revolution despite being offered increased powers to reject them, therefore, he writes to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini:

"I joined you because I saw you as a man of belief and action. I accepted the post of presidency in order to serve the people according to my belief and spend all my power in defending the principles. However, it has become obvious that you do not want a man of belief and action, but a lackey. The title of presidency is not a status to violate my principles and belief for them. If I am not able to serve, I have no attraction to such titles. If you are looking for a lackey, there are so many lackeys, do not expect such a thing from me. The Shah was not overthrown to be replaced with a worse system."

So Bani-Sadr refuses to bow to Ayatollah Khomeini's threats and warns people to resist the coup he sees is in motion. While Bani-Sadr is still president, the head of the Revolutionary Courts (Ayatollah Gillani) issues a fatwa for his execution seven times over. Army generals suggest that Bani-Sadr might conduct his own coup against the clergy but he refuses on two grounds.

First, Bani-Sadr opposes military intervention into politics; second, he does not want to weaken the forces defending Iran against the Iraqi army, which still holds some Iranian territory under its control. The clergy are not so concerned;

as Khomeini's grandson, (Syed Hussein) later revealed, the leaders of the Islamic Republic Party – Ayatollah Beheshti, Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ali Khamenei – would prefer to lose half of Iran's territory than for Bani-Sadr win the war with Iraq.

"I have debated with them [the IRP]," he said, "and they told me that even if we lose Khuzestan and even half of Iran, it is better than Bani-Sadr winning this war."

Driving Bani-Sadr Underground

Bani-Sadr's enemies bring Revolutionary Guard units from the warfront to Tehran in order to carry out their coup. At this point, President Bani-Sadr goes underground and sends a message to the Iranian people. He says:

"What is important is not the elimination of the president, but the fact that the demon of despotism and oppression once again wants to impose itself upon you, the people, and to make the precious blood shed for Islam and freedom, worthless."

His house is bombed, the presidential office is attacked, and many members of his staff are arrested. Some of them are executed: Manuchehr Masudi, the advisor to the president on human rights who exposed the widespread use of torture in prisons; Navab Safavi, a journalist and presidential advisor of the president; Rashid-Sadr-Alhefaazi, whose detailed investigation showed that Ayatollah Khomeini and Ronald Reagan had made a clandestine agreement to postpone the release of over 52 American hostages in Iran to increase Reagan's election chance (over Democratic candidate) President Jimmy Carter.

This agreement later became known as the "October Surprise." [For the most detailed account of the evidence regarding the alleged Republican/Iranian deal, see Robert Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative](#).]

During this time, the Offices of Cooperation of the People with the President, the only political organizations to have emerged democratically and horizontally across the country, are relentlessly attacked. Thousands of people are arrested, and many are tortured and executed. Other people who shelter the president while he is underground are arrested and executed.

Ayatollah Beheshti then tries to remove the president through the Supreme Court on the ground that he has violated the country's constitution. The judges, who until this point have maintained their independence (unlike Brazil's "anti-democratic judicial system"), resist and argue that there are no constitutional grounds for removing the president. Later, Ayatollah Musavi Ardebili, the country's public prosecutor, revealed why the attempt to remove Bani-Sadr

through the Supreme Court failed.

He said: “the court in the Judiciary in those days was not ready; the judges were not cleansed yet and of those who were like minded to the president and supporters of liberalism and small organizations [*goroohakhaa*, a derogatory term for organizations like the Mojaheddin and Marxist Fedaeeyaan organization] were in top jobs in courts.”

Once again, Ayatollah Khomeini intervenes. In direct violation of the constitution, he orders the head of parliament, Rafsanjani, to start a process of removing the president through the parliament. Instead of pointing out that this demand is in violation of the constitution, Rafsanjani enthusiastically starts the process and in less than two hours gathers 120 signatures of ministers of parliament to debate the removal of the president on grounds of incompetency through numerous and repeated violations of the constitution.

Widespread Intimidation

MP Ahmad Ghazanfar-pour dares to read a message from the president in parliament. In it, Bani-Sadr informs people that the Iraqi government has agreed to a peace deal which is advantageous to Iran, as Saddam Hussein had agreed to remove his troops out of Iran’s occupied land and pay a hefty compensation. (It should also be noted that had the process of overthrowing the president been postponed by even one week, a peace deal with Saddam Hussein would have been signed.)

Attempts are made to assassinate Ghazanfar-pour and his colleague as they left the parliament, but they are able to dodge the bullets.

During an ensuing two-day debate about Bani-Sadr’s presidential competence, the parliament is surrounded and occupied by *hezbollahis* threatening to kill whoever dares to speak in favor of the president, chanting “Bani-Sadr, anti-God, should be executed” (*Banisadr zedo-allah-edaam bayaad gardad*). Later, Rafsanjani raised this terrorization of the pro-president MPs, stating: “and now the real force, which was *Hezbollah*, had entered the front, the real force of Imam’s line. There were these *hezbollahis* who surrounded the parliament and inflicted so much suffering on [the opposition] MPs.”

Thus, while 10 MPs had enrolled to talk in support the president, half of them are so terrorized that they absent themselves and three switch sides to demand the removal of the president. Just one, Ali-Akbar Moin-Far, openly defends the president. Significantly, he ends his defense with a verse from the Koran which is always spoken at the time of death: “To Allah we belong and to Him/Her we shall return,” as he had readied himself to die at the hands of the mob.

Those MPs in favor of removing the president fail to present any evidence to demonstrate that the president has violated the constitution. The most important reasons given for his incompetency are: his opposition to the occupation of American embassy; his opposition to torture and the execution of prisoners; his opposition to the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (the rule of jurist); his advocacy of human rights and democracy; and his opposition to creating a cult of personality around Khomeini.

Moin-Far argues that the reasons introduced for Bani-Sadr's incompetency are in fact cases for his competence in trying to uphold the constitution, and that he should be praised for it. [For Bani-Sadr's own account of the October Surprise case, see Consortiumnews.com's "'October Surprise' and 'Argo.'"]

Why 35 Years of Silence?

The removal of Abolhassan Bani-Sadr as president of Iran in June 1981 drastically altered the outcome of the Iranian Revolution and post-revolutionary Iranian politics, in particular, closing its democratic path and institutionalizing its dictatorial trajectory.

The question is why, after 35 years, does the academic community still fail to recognize these events as a coup d'état and continue to endorse the official narrative of the president's removal, describing it in terms of "dismissal," "impeachment," "ousting," and his being "thrown out"?

In response to an article I attempted to publish about this case in a reputable academic journal, for example, one reviewer argued that the "legal process was carefully drawn up and constitutional shortcomings ... were bridged using legislation." Why, in 35 years, has no research been done to interrogate the nature of such an historical event, with so many documents and testimonies clearly pointing towards a coup being ignored and left to the dust?

It is understandable that those in Iran's ruling regime, both conservative and reformist, have every interest in portraying Bani-Sadr's removal as legal and constitutional: they all actively participated in the coup, and recognizing the events as a coup would render all the subsequent governments as unconstitutional.

However, this does not explain why many experts in the field who are working in the West passively or even actively support this official line, even at the cost of academic freedom and critical thinking, particularly as they do not have to tiptoe around the regime.

Why, instead of providing space for counter-narratives, are they are doing their best to snuff them out the critical exploration of an historical event

whose reinterpretation could fundamentally transform our understanding of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and current Iranian politics?

A Mystery of Silence

Apart from the political and ideological forces which clearly bear on this debate, maybe such unbending resistance to the entrance of this narrative into the literature can be understood in terms of the discourse which needs to make such an event invisible.

After all, as Michael Foucault has illustrated, one of the main functions of discourse in regimes of truth is to make anything outside as other, unthinkable and unsayable. Maybe an alteration of the broader discourse framing these events would undermine the foundation of existing scholarly work.

Once, Albert Einstein asked fellow physicist Niels Bohr whether he believed that “the moon does not exist if nobody is looking at it.” Bohr replied: “he would not be able to prove that it does.”

And once the philosopher George Berkley asked, “If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound”? The answer is no, since in order to hear a sound there should be a listener. The question is, if a thing takes place within social reality and is observed, but the ones who guard the borders of “what is permissible knowledge” refuse to acknowledge them, what happens to this experience?

Foucault was interested in what he called “subjugated knowledges,” which he described in two forms: first, “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematizations,” and second, “knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.”

The question is how to bring such knowledge to the fore. Foucault argued that archaeological and genealogical methods of critique can “desubjugate” these historical knowledges in order “to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal and scientific theoretical discourse.”

Thomas Kuhn, in his ground-breaking analysis of paradigm shifts in scientific knowledge, demonstrated that shifts in scholarly consensus of this sort emerge from continuous struggle as the beliefs and institutions of “normal science” depend on the consensus for their survival.

It seems that such determination is also needed to challenge the consensus within political and academic discourse. The battle to crack the consensus on the nature of president Bani-Sadr's removal in 1981 can be fought by exposing the anomalies between the existing historical consensus and the alternative interpretations.

We can fundamentally transform our understanding of the Iranian revolution by letting the untold stories to be told.

Mahmood Delkhasteh has a sociology doctorate from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is currently working on a new book based on his doctoral dissertation, *Islamic Discourses of Power and Freedom in the Iranian Revolution, 1979-81*. He has held lecturing positions at the American University – Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) and Kingston University (UK). He presently works as an independent researcher, columnist and political activist.
