

# Iran Looks for the Sect

By Alain Vivien (former French Minister and a specialist on sects)

As a general rule, dictatorships do not allow anyone to challenge their authority and, when they claim to be founded on religious ideology, they oppose any dialogue that would inevitably lead them to question it. Hypocritical leaders happily take the place of God, and set themselves up as his only spokesmen. Any conflicting opinions are swiftly demonized as being sects.

However ambiguous the accepted meaning of the term “sect” is in all the different languages in the world, it is still viewed universally in a very negative light. It is seen as masking social realities, something which is dangerous both for the individual and for social stability.

The etymological root of the word is the Latin word *secare* (meaning to cut, or to cut oneself off from someone or something), or the word *sequi* (meaning to follow a man or a doctrine). The term sect does not have good press. Even in the United States where, up until recently, the term was commonly used when referring to religious organisations, the media are now very careful to only use the term circumspectly. Recently, an Evangelical denomination advised the journalists at the daily paper which they control, to avoid using the term henceforth.

However, in reality, the way people think about the sectarian phenomenon and its current spread has hardly advanced at all in North America, where many movements flourish with complete impunity, whilst being kept under close scrutiny by the democratic States. Also, for the last quarter of the twentieth century, the European nations endeavoured to analyse sectarianism as a social reality, rather than as a fantasy or a fad. They tried to study the phenomenon, and they also tried to implement ways to guard against it. This task was all the more necessary because, as with so many other things, it is now becoming globalised.

Instead of attempting a legal definition, which is an almost impossible task due to the secularisation of modern States, which prohibits them from intervening in matters of faith or ideology, our attention is instead focused on behaviour.

This behaviour can be observed and compared to the accepted norms of human society, whether it is with regard to national laws or international commitments signed up to by States, with a view to defending and promoting human rights. These fundamental values which are recognised for human beings, are sanctioned by agreements that each member of the international community, who was involved in the deliberations, is bound to sign and adhere to.

It is in the same vein, for example, that the French parliament, using the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (Declaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen de 1789) and the resulting Declarations voted by the United Nations and the European

Community, extended the provisions of the penal code to all people living on French soil, in order to “protect the weak from abuse”. Since 2001 the About-Picard law, (named after the people who drafted it) allows the law to take disciplinary action against individuals and legal entities who are guilty of abuses of power, or of collusion with sects.

The European Parliament for its part, through the Commission for Human Rights has also intervened to warn governments to guard against the sectarian phenomenon. They advised “*member states to pay particular attention to the sometimes illegal or criminal activities of certain sects, which endanger the physical and psychological integrity of individuals*”. They suggested organising public vigilance through “*organisations that are specialised in the defence of human rights, conducting information programmes and public awareness campaigns*” and by “*adopting sufficient legal, fiscal and penal measures in order to thwart the illegal schemes of certain sects*”.

Of all the dictatorships that exist in the world today, the one which was formed in Iran with the return of Ayatollah Khomeyni from exile, and with the setting up of the mullah’s theocracy is, without a doubt, one of the most tyrannical and brutal.

Having given itself omniscient and omnipresent religious authority, the mullahs’ theocracy claims to justify its methods of government by publishing quasi divine orders and by issuing fatwas. Discussions about these fatwas are prohibited, and they are not limited geographically because, in certain cases, the mullahs would not hesitate in encouraging the application of these measures outside the Iranian borders.

The most everyday rules in the legislation that has evolved have been relegated to second place, that is as long as they are not purely and simply denounced as being “satanic”. The presumption of innocence, the youth of those presumed to be “guilty”, and the independence of the judiciary are not recognised.

The mullah government seems to be like a sect who has managed to get their hands on the power of the State. This is the dream of all monocratic ideologies, whether they are inspired by material or religious ideals.

The regime, which is loathed by civilised people everywhere, is making absolutely no attempt to improve their image internationally. One of the methods they use is to accuse those that question them, (especially their Iranian opponents, and in particular one of the main opposition movements, the PMOI (The People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, l’Organisation des Moudjahidine du peuple d’Iran) of being sectarian.

This is not a new method. One quite often hears of sectarian organisations denouncing what they claim to be sectarianism in those who oppose them. These semantic reversals are of interest, however to those who work to defend human rights, as it encourages them to examine the actual behaviour of those that the tyrannical regimes attempt to stigmatise more thoroughly.

The first denunciation issued by Teheran was that the popular movement of the Mojahedin was allegedly a terrorist sect. This was a terrible accusation, and one which was designed to horrify the West in these times when terrorist attacks are increasing at an alarming rate. It was designed to horrify particularly the American government, which had been destabilized since the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Although the Organisation for the People's Mojahedin was not on the Security Council's list of terrorist organisations, the Iranian regime has exploited the pernicious atmosphere in the United States since September the 11<sup>th</sup>. However, there have not been any acts of terrorism, either in Europe or in the United States that could be attributed to Iranian resistance fighters. As far as denying them the right to support the popular forces who are fighting against the regime in Iran, no Western power could reconcile themselves to do that without renouncing the liberation movements in their own past. Furthermore, the PMOI has never carried out operations outside Iran, and it suspended its operations inside the country in June 2001.

When Iranian refugees and US troops came face to face at the Ashraf camp during the US intervention in Iraq, the "allied" command found themselves facing an absurd situation. The so-called Ashraf terrorists were fighting for freedom in Iran, a country whose regime was discreetly supporting a substantial part of Iraqi political insurgents against American troops. Remarkable terrorists who were also fighting for liberty, a cause which is so dear to the United States! In July 2004 the Ashraf refugees were at last recognised by the American command as "protected persons" under the 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention...although, they still remained on the list of terrorist organisations, like the other members of the popular Mojahedin movement. This is not easy to comprehend!

The attitude of Western countries in this case was not exactly honourable. And most of the States of the European Union who are bogged down in commercial strategies with Iran, continue to prevaricate, instead of correcting their position by taking the PMOI off this terrible list. What is perhaps even more serious, is that it would seem that in recent international negotiations with Teheran, keeping the PMOI as a terrorist organisations is, in some cases, like a bargaining chip that Western companies who are interested in the Iranian market can exchange for commercial advantages from Teheran.

Regarding other aspects of the accusations made by the mullahs against the PMOI, the analysis perspective of the sectarian phenomenon, which is most commonly accepted is perfectly workable in today's climate. There are several criteria which determine the sectarian character of a movement, without it being necessary for all of them to be present in one organisation.

These criteria are concerned both with a person's inalienable rights and the respect of rules which guarantee peace in society.

One of these is fundamental, i.e. freedom of expression through associative legislation. In this regard, Iran under the mullahs distinguishes itself *"by having a legal framework which is opaque, precarious and subject to much interference from the authorities"*,

according to the Guide on associative freedom in the world (1). *“It is, first and foremost, the practices which are tolerated by the authorities which prevail over the few sparse legal texts which govern community life (the law of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1981 and article 584 of the code of commerce)”*. The institutions which are recognised and approved by the regime itself, and which clearly submit fully to the regime, for example, the Foundation for the underprivileged (which holds the Shah’s assets in usufruct), the Foundation of Martyrs, which manages the nationalised or despoiled properties such as the French Lycées in Teheran and Bonyad, and religious foundations, are all exempt from this legislation, which has deliberately been kept in an embryonic state.

These provisions leave hardly any room for associative pluralism, and there is great suspicion surrounding nongovernmental organisations, especially if they are originally from abroad.

From the fundamental point of view regarding emancipation and human freedom, the regime currently in power in Teheran can be considered to be both totalitarian and sectarian. On the other hand, the PMOI cannot be considered as such, as they do not exercise any governmental responsibility. However they have proclaimed on several occasions that, at the right moment, they would like to promote the creation of a law regarding emancipation and human freedom, which would be worthy of the Iranian people and which would conform to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Iran itself has subscribed to previously.

Are there any other reasons why the PMOI could be deemed to be a sect? The accusation brought against the PMOI often concerns its political structure. It is an abiding feature of sectarian movements, that they are based (at least at the beginning) on a charismatic leader who has total control over his followers, and that he has assigned himself a mission, normally a divine mission, and that he is the only person to know its secret .

Despite any aura that Massoud Radjavi may have had, it is difficult to see, in his opposition to the mullahs’ regime, the actions of someone who was inspired by divinity or that he was delivering esoteric messages. Massoud Radjavi has never decreed by any act whatsoever the inviolable nature of his opinions. Nor has he ever published a fatwa. Nor is Maryam Radjavi, president elect of the CNRI (a coalition whose main constituent is the PMOI), involved in these sorts of situations which make progress impossible. On the contrary, a courageous affirmation of the principles of laity by a Muslim woman ran the risk of stripping the PMOI of its sectarian unction, something that the mullahs used and abused. However, she is founding a future for Iran on a solid and respectable basis.

When their arguments accusing the PMOI fail, Teheran’s speeches change direction. The PMOI is a sect because the historical leader was succeeded by Maryam Radjavi, i.e. because someone from the same family is now leading the movement. Besides the whiff of antifeminism which emanates from this accusation, how can we not notice this new step which consists in forbidding a citizen, male or female, from carrying out political responsibilities based on the mere fact that their spouse, or one of their close relatives had

exercised the responsibility previously? Imagine Hilary Clinton or Segolene Royal being victims in advance of sectarian and macho disapproval!

But how devoted are the PMOI activists to the president of the movement? It would seem that, although Maryam Rajavi is well liked by the People's Mojahedin and has a certain moral authority, the PMOI supporters do not form any kind of visible cult around her. She does not prophesize for their benefit alone, and she does not have a Holy Office to counter any possible heresies. The PMOI goes counter to the usual operations of sects who, as far as possible, avoid endowing themselves with a democratic status. Despite the threats they have received from Teheran, the PMOI has regularly held their biennial conferences with members of the press and guests being present, just like any political formation worthy of the name. The general secretariat has been changed, and on six occasions women have risen to positions of responsibility. It would not seem that the decisions made by the organisation escape the collegiality of its leaders, nor would it seem that the president wields the power single-handedly.

On the other hand, it is difficult not to draw a parallel between these democratic practices and those currently witnessed in Teheran. The regime's line of conduct is determined, not by popular approval, but instead by the allegedly religious ratification by the Valid-e-Faghih, the one and only "revolutionary" guide for political acts, which has made some particularly appalling decisions. We remember, for example, the fatwa that was issued in October 1981, which was never reported or even modified, by which Khomeyni recommended that, in order to be able to stock fresh blood for the soldiers who had been wounded at the front, people who had been sentenced by the regime should have their blood drained out of them using a syringe, before they were executed. Alas, there were very many examples of these "religious" orders issued by the Guide, and which are now issued by his successor, Khamenei.

Would the PMOI use these techniques of restraint, or would they use violence to hold dissidents in check? The accusation has been made several times. But these accusations have always come from Teheran, and sometimes have the backing of witness who seem to be "inspired". From this point of view, a thorough investigation authenticated by the organisations which work for the defence of human rights, such as the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), would be most welcome. The PMOI has declared, on several occasions, that they would be willing for nongovernmental organisations, who work for the defence of human rights, to carry out an investigation. The independence, reliability and respectability of such an organisation are paramount. What credence can be given to the testimonies of people who have links with the Iranian secret services and whose families back in Iran are subjected to a huge amount of pressure? Since the time of the Soviet purges, spontaneous testimonies and confessions have not been lacking. However, would the mullah's regime agree to an investigative mission being sent to Iran which would be free to move about and meet whoever they wanted to? This is highly unlikely, as it would challenge the expressly totalitarian and sectarian foundations of the mullah's political system, as it was set out in August 1988 by a Khomeinist theologian. *"The Velayat-e-Faghih signifies the absolute religious and legal supervision by the Faghih. This supervision applies to the whole world and everything in existence [...]* to

*everything relating to human life, whether it be collective or individual, and to all political, social or family matters”.*

In the meantime, there is a continuous deluge of denunciations coming from Teheran. The PMOI is allegedly brainwashing and conditioning people on a regular basis. However, the easily verifiable testimonies of all those who approach the exiled Iranian dissidents in Auvers-sur-Oise, describe the PMOI activists as been typical activists, men and women who are trying, like so many others, to bring victory to their cause, without creating any trouble in the country which has taken them in and, all the while respecting the laws of the French Republic. Likewise, there have been no reports of indoctrination of young Iranians living in France with their families. They attend schools without any provocation regarding their dress or how they speak. They practice their religion freely and peacefully. Luckily, they do not resemble the children, who were supposedly volunteers, who the mullahs sent in, in advance of the regular troops, in the war between Baghdad and Teheran.

The honourable behaviour of these young Muslim exiles is undoubtedly helped by the fact that their parents have chosen secularism. Unlike other opposition movements who have leanings towards Marxism, the PMOI claims to adhere to a tolerant Islam, and that one day they wish to establish a constitution in Teheran which would satisfy both civil necessities and religious convictions. These principles are, no doubt, incompatible with the politico religious system that the Islamic nomenclature established in 1979. It is true that the implementation of such a constitution would cause the current totalitarian system to collapse and would force the regime's privileged few to return to less lucrative and probably, more restrictive occupations.

What should we say about the other accusations made against the Mojahedin? The Iranian secular resistance, which is scattered around the world, is allegedly supporting movements which oppose Islam? However, nobody can name even one such movement.

Would the organisation push for foreign intervention inside Iran? To date, there is no proof of this. The PMOI has frequently expressed their disagreement with the “military options” which some people have been contemplating in order to topple the mullah government from outside the country. The People's Mojahedin have too many supporters inside Iran to hope for, let alone encourage, a war of liberation led from outside the country, as they have weighed up the human cost. However, how could one dismiss out of hand the possibility that a powerful domestic opposition could unite the masses in Iran and force the regime to give up? The French, and other Europeans too, know that “when a government violates peoples' rights and liberties, resistance is the most sacred right and the most pressing duty”. (2)

What these principles mean for the resistance movements is the right to get themselves organised and reunite legally. When the accusations of terrorism were shown to be both ineffective and unfounded, the Iranian services made new accusations which were to do with financing the opposition. Also, friends of the regime in Teheran took great delight in the police action which was carried out in an inconsiderate fashion in June 2003 in

Auvers-sur-Oise, the consequences of which have since proved to be unjustified and unfounded. The importance of the PMOI's action was misjudged, it was in fact a most legitimate action. Between 1940 and 1944, where did the funds for free France come from if it wasn't from the French people themselves and from their friends abroad? As Daniele Mitterrand said in June 2003, would it not be better to put these facts "in their context and their reality". Nothing should be done which seems to indirectly or involuntarily support foreign dictatorships, nor should their immoral economic indulgences be justified. Let us not confuse the necessities of fighting for the reestablishment of a democracy, with money laundering which is usually run by multinational sects who are never willing to declare the origin of the funds they collect and transfer, taking advantage of the free circulation of capital which is accepted in the European Economic Area.....

The fact that the PMOI has to keep on justifying the non-sectarian nature of their actions against the mullah's system is, in fact, helping the dictatorship to stay in power.

How much better it would be to speed up the departure of the mullahs, if they were to adopt a firm and resolute attitude towards the regime. No hope of an agreement can make the abuses of power that are carried out on a daily basis in Iran against its nationals tolerable. They are in the struggle for the liberation of their country, and they are the victims of a "justice" which is the vassal of fundamentalism. Whilst having ambiguous dialogues, in which the supporters of the current regime can easily detect weaknesses and uncertainties, the democratic nations are doing nothing to improve their prospects for the future either socially or commercially. Because the negotiators will not be subservient to the mullahs for ever, and a time will come when Iran will rejoin the group of modern nations. What confidence can we have in Western companies who have got mixed up with the mullahs and have never expressed any reservations at all about their ideology?

By giving up on insisting on the respect of human rights, even momentarily, their strength and universality are undermined, and anyway no advantage is gained in discussions which were biased from the very outset.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of April last year, in Strasburg, the president of the NCRI mentioned that a policy of tacit consent, which had been followed for years in the West, had not borne any fruit and that unless a policy of firmness were adopted, the fundamentalist regime would soon acquire an atomic weapon which would "*lead the international community to the abyss*". The very near future will give us a reply, one way or another, to the anguish which is growing daily all around the world.

In any case, this smoke screen that the mullahs have put up seems so unrealistic, and the accusations of terrorism and sectarianism so derisory, when it is they who could more accurately be described as being terrorists and sectarians, rather than their democratic enemies. Hope is gradually changing sides, and as Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner declared a few days ago, *In order to win our liberty each one of us must agree to make sacrifices. I see the ranks of those who are willing to do so growing day by day.*

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(1) French documentation, Paris, 2000.

(2) The Declaration of Rights of 1946, preamble to the Constitution, article 21.