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Sitting under the Iran Revolutionary Guards Command, Basij is a large paramilitary organisation with multifaceted roles. It has played an important role as the "eyes and ears" of the Islamic regime throughout the 32 years of ayatollahs' reign in Iran and in fact has significantly grown in importance since the disputed presidential election of 2009.

Although much has been written on the Basij and its relationship to the IRGC, less is known about the student branch in spite of its key role on university campuses since Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election in June 2009. In an orchestrated attempt by the IRGC and other security apparatuses, the student branch of Basij – SBO – was used as a tool to help in the suppression of protesting students and professors, while, and perhaps more importantly, it has been utilised as an ideological school educating "future managers of the regime".

At the same time, and as a side effect of the complete elimination of oppositional parties since June 2009, a growing rift seems to be emerging between the President and his supporters and the office of the Supreme Leader. In what appears to be a tactical move prior to the upcoming parliamentary elections, President Ahmadinejad and his closest ally, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, have been promoting an Islamic-nationalistic discourse in order to attract a portion of reformist votes thereby expanding their own power base at the expense of the conservative clerical establishment; a strategy that has faced fierce criticisms from the Khamenei camp.

Given the demographic of Iran with its large percentage of youngsters enrolled on various university courses throughout the country, this constituency and its voting behaviour is once again to prove critical in determining the balance of power in the Iranian polity. Undoubtedly, the SBO will play a key role in upcoming elections thanks to its ability and resources to influence and/or shape the political preferences of students. What remains to be seen, however, is which fraction the SBO will side with and whose cause and agenda it will seek to promote.

Established in November 25, 1989, the SBO is managed in a top-down fashion with its main headquarter in Tehran. Each of Iran's thirty provinces is a designated SBO region with each region divided into multiple zones in charge of approximately ten SBO bases located in both Islamic Azad Universities as well as the governmental ones.

Up until 2005, SBO was responsible for promotion of Islamic Republic's principles in universities, and after the student uprising of 1998/99 it was assigned with the task to undermine the reformist government of President Khatami. With the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the fourth president of the Republic in 2005, however, the relationship between the SBO and the government entered a new phase. While SBO retained its core responsibility of recruiting new members and simultaneously promoting regime's norms and values, the other key function of the organisation was now to do the opposite of what it was asked to do during the Khatami era; that is, to defend and support the Ahmadinejad government.

What is more, SBO now has the regime's blessing to seek recruits not only from universities but also primary schools and high-schools. Although hard to confirm, there are independent reports that since last November, 6,000 Basij centres have been established in schools across the country with pupils joining different groups in accordance to their age; the "Hope Resistance" for 7 to 11 year olds, the "Dynamic Resistance" for those aged 11 to 13, and the "Pioneer Resistance" for high school students aged between 14 and 18.

Finally, in its attempt to attract a larger number of students, the SBO offers a number of incentives of which a "fast-tracked path" to governmental jobs and "Basij-specific quota" for both graduate and postgraduate studies do stand out. However, volunteers must become active members to take advantage of such privileges which in turn requires them to undergo ideological, political, and military trainings provided by the Imam Khomeini institution, Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader within the Basij, and the IRGC respectively.

Starting from the end of Khatami's presidency, the IRGC, which had set its eyes on increasing its role in Iranian politics, restructured and expanded the Basij force into every aspect of Iranian social life with the purpose of establishing an effective voting bloc in support of its favourite candidates.

SBO is given a high priority in this strategy because Iranian students and intellectuals played a key role in the formation of the so called Green Movement. Thus, the bitter battle between the President and Rafsanjani over the ownership of Islamic Azad University (IAU), with its 1.5 million faculty members and students, had more to do with Ahmadinejad's block desire to facilitate SBO's activities on IAU campuses than the status of the University's assets as tax-exempt endowments.

Currently, President Ahmadinejad is under increasing pressure from a Parliament filled with Khamenei loyalists. Ahmadinejad and his supporters know that they need to gain the upper hand in the Majlis in order to ensure their political survivability and for doing so they will need the cooperation of SBO, Basij, and indeed the IRGC.

The trouble is that it is hard to speculate on the Basij/IRGC stance with a degree of accuracy because they have been suspiciously silent with regard to recent political developments in the country. One reason for this, perhaps, is their wish to project an image of themselves as

politically neutral so to be able to avoid international and domestic sensitivities that their political activism could potentially cause – i.e. emergence of military dictatorship in Iran.

What seems certain though is that the opposition – factoring out recent protests in Khuzestan – has been largely silenced and that the crisis of morality within the IRGC and Basij, which many Iran experts explored after the election, has now been replaced with an ideological crisis within these forces.

Older members, bounded together by the shared experiences of revolution and war, tend to favour the preservation of the status-quo and hence are likely to remain loyal to the Supreme Leader.

In contrast, the younger generations of the Basij and the IRGC, the majority of whom joined these organisations out of their political ambitions in the first place, have an entirely different view. Not only do they find the Islamic-nationalistic discourse more attractive and less stringent, but they also, similar to the President, have realised that supporting the Supreme Leader and/or close association with his office is no longer a political currency; after all, Khamenei is the most detested political figure in contemporary Iran.

It follows then that for the very first time in its history, the Islamic Republic has started shaking from within and that the discourse of "regime survival" is gradually but surely losing its unifying vigour. Ahmadinejad is now publically criticised by forces close to the Supreme Leader while Khamenei has lost immunity from criticism and disapproval within the President's camp, let alone the wider public.

Meanwhile, Tehran's authority in certain border cities seems to be diminishing evident in armed clashes between the police and separatist movements in Sanandaj, Ahvaz, and Baluchistan. Economic stagnation is the order of the day with double digit inflation and unemployment rates as well as an ever increasing price of food. Independent reports from Iran also suggest that the price of gas and electricity have increased five-fold since the abolishment of fuel subsidies and that regime is becoming increasingly unpopular amongst the working class. Therefore, while the world is focused on the Arab Spring, a tsunami might be about to hit Iran.