

# PERSPECTIVES

## The opposition in Iran is on the rise and it's optimistic

By Saeed Dorani

**O**NLY FIVE YEARS AFTER the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Khomeini regime is facing a resistance movement that believes the regime's days are numbered.

This optimism on the part of the opposition is based on the existence of a ruined economy, an unpopular war, fierce competition among ruling factions, murderous suppression of dissidents and the steady growth of opposition. The Iran-Iraq war has already been accompanied by 50 percent unemployment, a 400 percent inflation rate, shortages and rationing of most commodities and three million refugees. Conflicts among leaders of Khomeini's state apparatus are growing. Resignations, purges and public attacks are daily occurrences. On occasion, Khomeini himself has had to step in and dismiss or reshuffle officials in order to get the government to function.

Above all, what appears to be the only viable democratic alternative to the Khomeini regime—the National Council of Resistance—and its principal constituent member—the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran—are organizing the growing Resistance. In a country where 11-year-old children caught with anti-government leaflets are subjected to torture and execution (as reported recently by Amnesty International), the messages and pictures of Massoud Rajavi, chairman of the National Council of Resistance and leader of the People's Mojahedin, continue to be widely distributed and displayed.

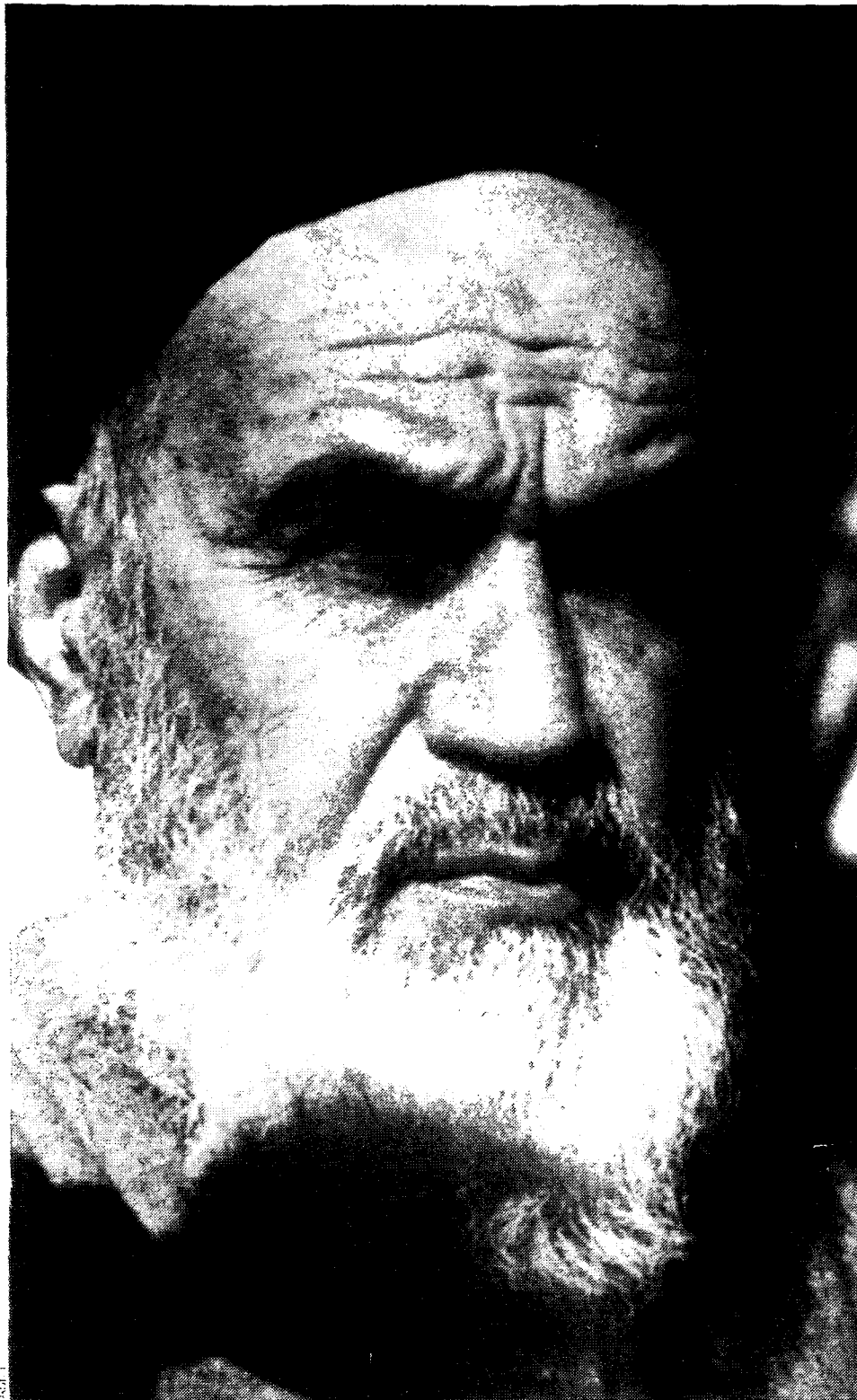
Despite severe repression and the round the clock presence of more than 5,000 bullet-proof patrol cars in the streets of Tehran, news of resistance and the regime's savagery spreads and secret gatherings and ceremonies to honor martyrs of the Resistance are held.

The most important of such occasions was February 8, which marked the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Commander Moussa Khiabani (Rajavi's deputy and the politico-military commander of the Mojahedin inside Iran), Ashraf Rabi'i (Rajavi's wife) and Azar Rezai'i (Moussa Khiabani's wife and the famous Rezai'i family's fifth martyr) as well as 17 other members of the Mojahedin.

They were slain two years ago as they fought the Pasdaran (Khomeini's guards) who had attacked their residence in Tehran.

The same evening, a shocking scene was broadcast on National Iranian Television. Lajevardi, head of Tehran's Evin Prison, held in his arms Mostafa, the in-

*A democratic alternative to the Khomeini regime exists in the National Council of Resistance, led by the people's Mojahedin.*



Conflicts in Khomeini's Iran are growing as conditions in the country deteriorate.

fant son of Massoud Rajavi as he stood by the bodies of Ashraf Rabi'i (the baby's mother), Moussa Khiabani and other slain Mojahedin.

Throughout Iran people watched outraged at the blood-stained corpses and the one-year-old Mostafa crying in the arms of Khomeini's infamous torturer.

The bodies were also taken to the Evin Prison and displayed before the prisoners to break their morale. But the prisoners defied Lajevardi's order to desecrate the bodies. Instead, they saluted Commander Moussa. One prisoner stepped forward and spat on Lajevardi's face. On Lajevardi's order, 300 imprisoned Mojahedin were executed the same night.

Commander Moussa Khiabani and Mojahed Ashraf Rabi'i had previously been jailed for many years by the Shah and were freed by the people during the 1979 revolution. Their heroic resistance and the events following their martyrdom had a profound impact on the Iranian people. The vivid contrast between Khomeini's rascality and Mojahedin's self-sacrifice greatly increased popular sympathy with the Resistance. It turned February 8 into a national day to remember the more than 30,000 martyrs of the past two and a half years of resistance.

At the time of his martyrdom, "Moussa," 33, was one of the most brilliant figures of the Iranian revolution. His 15

years of struggle in the ranks of the Mojahedin and resistance against torture during seven years of captivity in the Shah's jails, his role in liberating the city of Tabriz during the final days of the Shah and his numerous lectures and speeches, particularly as a parliamentary candidate, had made Moussa Khiabani an unforgettable hero against the dictatorships of both the Shah and Khomeini. Ashraf Rabi'i had spent 10 years of her

life in struggle against the regimes of the Shah and Khomeini, enduring enormous torture in the Shah's jails. After the 1979 uprising, she lectured frequently on the objectives of the revolution. Being the most prominent woman member of the Mojahedin, she was regarded as the symbol of revolutionary Mojahed women.

Last year, people throughout Iran secretly commemorated the first anniversary of February 8th. Ceremonies were also held this year to mark the occasion. Iranians abroad organized various activities to publicize February 8 as a national symbol of the determination of the Resistance to "pay any price for freedom." Demonstrations were held in major Asian, European and American cities (Los Angeles, Montreal and New York) by the Moslem Iranian Students Societies (supporters of the Mojahedin) to promote a distinction between the Khomeini regime and the majority of the Iranian people and introduce the popular Iranian Resistance.

Many personalities and parties around the world have supported the struggle for democracy and social progress in Iran led by the Mojahedin. Among them are the Socialist Party of France, the Socialist Party of Italy, the British Labour Party. In Chicago, Professor Lee Anderson, chair of the Northwestern University Political Science Department, in a January 18 letter to Massoud Rajavi extended "feelings of Solidarity on the second anniversary of February 8, 1982.... That day will be remembered as a historic day in the endeavors of the Iranian people to achieve freedom...."

Khomeini's urgent need to suppress his opponents stems from the strength of the Resistance and the growing peace movement against a background of the deepening economic and social crises. In the face of war as a distraction from internal problems, the opposition publicizes its strategic slogan of "Peace and Freedom." In a communique broadcast repeatedly during the week of January 8-14 on the clandestine "Voice of Mojahed" radio, the Social Section of the People's Mojahedin proclaimed it "a week for peace." Initial reports said that the Resistance units and cells concentrated on leafletting and writing slogans throughout Iran. The campaign was especially successful in Tehran, Mashhad, Tabriz, Isfahan, Rasht, Lahijan, Semnan and Hamedan.

Despite the use of more than 20 security and intelligence organizations, armed patrol cars, street checkpoints and control of arterial routes into and out of cities and several other security plans, Khomeini has failed to deliver a strategic blow to the Mojahedin in the past 20 months. This is why in his recent speech he told his adherents: "We have all entered an arena in which we shall be defeated if we take one stride back." But there is not much room left for "improvements" in the severity of repression and he does not dare release any of the 100,000 political prisoners currently being held.

With continuous intensification of the crisis, all indicators point toward the collapse of the Khomeini regime. ■

*Saeed Dorani was a journalist in Iran before coming to the U.S.*

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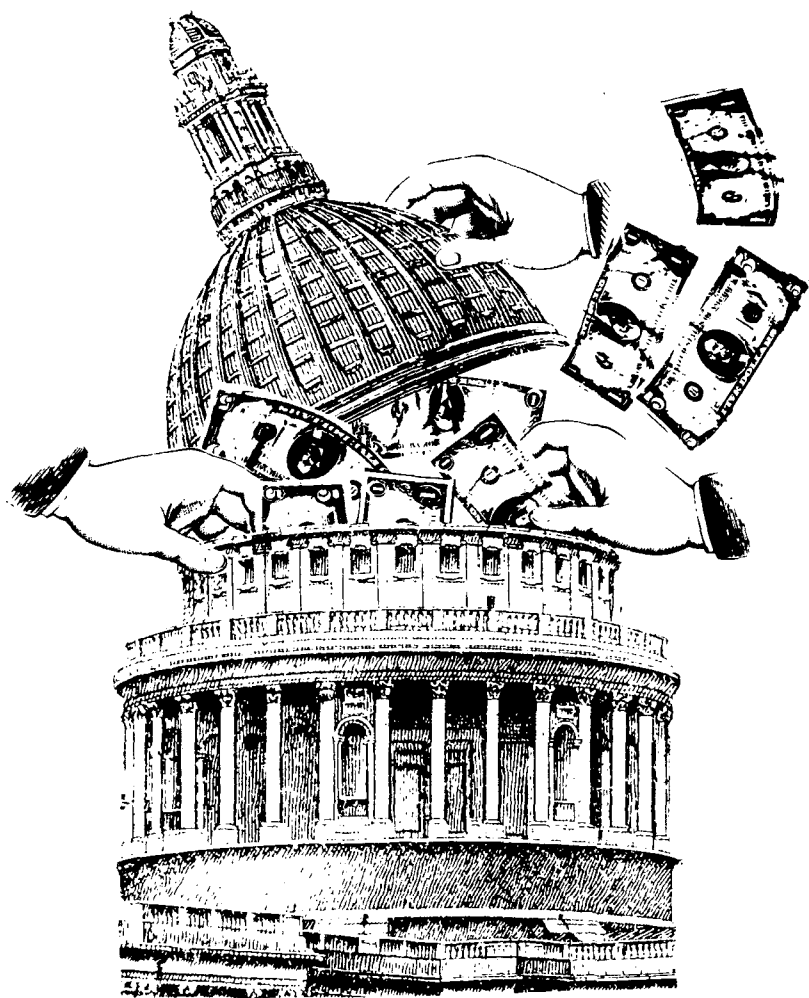
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**The Nation Thief**  
By Robert Houston  
Pantheon Books, 241 pp.,  
\$13.95

By Pat Aufderheide

Ever wonder why Latin Americans put such a vicious spin on the term "gringo," or why the Nicaraguans inserted "Yankees" into the first verse of their new national anthem? Experience, that's why.

The history of U.S. intervention in Latin America laces the sordid with the improbable. And there is no better example of it than the wacko but true story of William Walker, a diminutive Yankee journalist with megalomaniac tendencies. In the 1850s, with a ragtag army calling itself "The Immortals," he invaded Nicaragua on behalf of big U.S. money (Cornelius Vanderbilt, who had a canal in mind). He stayed to set up an empire of his own—a slave state, in fact. And he was finally run out by a coalition army from neighboring states, which was backed by big British money (they wanted what Vanderbilt wanted).

The whole thing makes *The Mosquito Coast* look like a Cook's tour.

Robert Houston's novel *The Nation Thief* renders this true, but conveniently forgotten story, in the form of an oral history. His characters are a sample drawn from the event's leading actors, some recreated more freely from life than others. (Walker wrote his own memoirs in 1860, and there are other histories as well.) Aside from Walker himself—always speaking, as he did in his memoirs, in the third person—there is a poor white soldier, a free black doctor, a white art journalist, an Indian officer in Walker's army, an American expatriate wife and a Nicaraguan prostitute.

Houston is not new to the task of drawing documentary-style fiction out of melodramatic fact; he wrote *Bisbee '17* about a 1917 Wobblly strike. As our grip on history—our own, let alone ours in relation to other nations'—loosens with every new TV docudrama, such an enterprise is laudable. Well done, it can restore a sense that these long ago and far away events were executed by people as real as you and me. Moreover, it can explain the very different motivations these people had from you and me, including in that most difficult of areas—the ways in which they were living out romance and ideals of their era, not the "mandate of necessity" that charms vulgar Marxists as much as it does supply-siders.

If what you want out of *The Nation Thief* is to be told a vivid bit of history, then this is an excellent book. It would, for instance, be a choice addition to a college course reading list. If what you want out of this literary exercise is some insight into the underlying problem—of how it is we can so grossly misperceive our own role as imperialists in the area of the world Reagan is pleased to term "our back yard"—then this is a good, an adequate book. But if what you want is an engrossing, innovative piece of fiction, then *The Nation Thief* isn't even under consideration.

For one, the oral history format comes with the liabilities of non-fiction oral histories. The narrators don't always answer the questions you would like to ask, and they do deliver mono-

logues. Where you would be patient with a living real-life voice, you tend to fidget with fictional characters. The author doesn't convince us that these people are all different, either. Most of them share disconcerting oddities of speech, particularly a tendency to go for the gaudy

metaphor. More crucial is the fact that Houston doesn't convince us these are authentic voices of the era. The language—again with the jarring exception of the quaint turn of phrase—sounds too modern, as do some of the social attitudes, such as the doctor's professional

*This fictional oral history tells the story of one man's invasion of Nicaragua in the 1850s.*

position. (Before modern drugs and high-tech equipment, the doctor's social status wasn't endowed with that saintly science aura.) Also unconvincing is the personal psychology of some of

were allowed to choose between submission or an invitation to a necktie party.

Each man gives a fully plausible motive for shooting Fix's son. One such account is given by a retired farmworker as he looks out at the unmarked graves of his parents and grandparents on land that may soon be cleared for sugarcane cultivation:

"I did it cause that tractor is getting closer and closer to that graveyard, and I was scared if I didn't do it, one day that tractor was go'n come in there and plow up them graves, getting rid of all proof that black people ever farmed this land with plows and mules—like if they had nothing from the starten but power machines. Sure, one day they will get rid of the proof that we ever was, but they ain't go'n do it while I'm still here....I'm the last one left. I had to see that the graves stayed for a little while longer."

The local whites who also inhabit Gaines' finely crafted landscape tell their own history as they react to the murder. Candy, who inherited the plantation as a child, was brought up by Mathu, the chief suspect. She adds a stiff dose of traditional paternalism to her compassion when she tells the sheriff that she will defend the black workers on the Marshall plantation from the Cajuns who seek to avenge the murder of one of their own. "Before I let them harm my people, I'll stand alone," she says. When the Cajuns discuss the murder and the likelihood of revenge they make no secret of the contempt other whites—liberals like Candy—have for them. But most importantly, the whites of the once-feudal area are far from emblems of unmitigated evil.

By the time the identity of the killer is determined—and those who read this riveting book have every right to discover that for

IN THESE TIMES FEB. 15-21, 1984 13 the characters, particularly the women—the American woman, in fact, has the affect of a conscientious upper-middle-class college girl in the '50s.

But if these oral histories don't sweep you back into the 19th century—whether because of limitations of the form or clumsiness of execution—the social psychology of this miniaturized imperialism is convincing. Oral history makes that easy, letting the characters just lay out what was in it for them. Importantly, what's explained is not the big-money, big-politics interests (they are easy to grasp, and well known), but the motivations of the followers, the rank-and-file, people who did the dirty work.

Given the misery of opportunity in the U.S., for instance, the free black doctor finds that a job in a racist invaders' army looks good—not for the money, but for the respect. To a cracker born to hopelessness, the glory of being an "Immortal" has an irresistible allure. To the Indian officer, no loyalty is so strong as is his hatred of the corrupt Latino leaders of Central American society. And the dreamy artist is swept along by destiny—what would be called, in a later generation, manifest destiny.

"You have to understand, gentlemen," he says, "that everything was possible in those days...The world was endless; if you were an American and had the future on your side, the world was waiting for you, praying for you."

Some people still believe it. ■

themselves—Gaines has assembled a vivid fictional history of this tiny corner of rural Louisiana. He presents a powerful portrait deeply rooted in the age-old pattern of everyday life and the lyricism of daily speech.

But *A Gathering of Old Men* is far more than a superb example of realistic "regional" writing (if that demeaning category must be invoked). It's also the story of a struggle for simple recognition against the barriers of poverty, political exclusion and a community's shared fatalism. The feeble old men who fight this struggle one afternoon learn in the course of their invocations of the past that talking about their own history is the first step toward making it. ■

David D'Arcy reviews books for WBAI radio in New York.

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FICTION

## Delusions and destiny



## Old Men: Many motives, one murder

**A Gathering of Old Men**  
By Ernest J. Gaines  
Knopf, 214 pp., \$13.95

By David D'Arcy

Ernest J. Gaines, author of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, has been something of a William Faulkner of the black South. St. Raphael parish northwest of Baton Rouge is his Yoknapatawpha County, and the Faulknerian voices that narrate his novels ring with the rhythms, humor and history of this rural area. The young have all departed in search of jobs, leaving the very old and a few children on the land where grievances and bonds of affection have endured among the parish's blacks, English-speaking whites and Cajuns for generations.

Land is the source of the many grievances. An old black man explains this as he sets the scene for the complicated events of *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines' dramatic new novel. "We had not the worst land from the start, and no matter how hard we worked it, the people with the best land was go'n always be in front. All you old people know this already. After the plantation was dying out, the Marshall's dosed out the land for sharecropping, giving the best land to the Cajuns, and giving us the worst—that botomland near the swamps. Here,

our own black people had been working this land 100 years for the Marshall plantation, but when it came to sharecropping, now they gave the best land to the Cajuns, who had never set food on the land before."

There has been a murder in the black quarters of the vast Marshall plantation. The victim is Beau Boutan, a Cajun farmer and the son of the feared segregationist parish boss, Fix Boutan. Beau had been leasing land from Candy Marshall, the headstrong, liberal young white landowner. By all appearances, the killer is Mathu, an 80-year-old black farmworker with a history of rebelliousness that has always set him apart from the other black workers. Candy, however, claims that she has killed Beau, and she summons the entire older generation of black men from around the countryside to hear her confession. The men, all in their 70s, arrive with shotguns and spent shells, each of them claiming to be the murderer. When the local sheriff—known for violent interrogations—shows up, the scene is set for each of the self-proclaimed killers to confess.

In a series of speeches—some of near-operatic power—each of these old men tells the small crowd assembled at the quarters of his own experiences under the domination of Fix Boutan. Arbitrary violence was a way of life, and black men who resisted