Positive Thinking in Tehran: Youth Embrace Self-Help Movement

New Age Devotees, Chanting 'Yes, I Can,' Flock to Unlikely Guru: 'The Secret' in Farsi

By Franaz Fasshih

TEHRAN, Iran — When Hassan Bakhtiar couldn't find a job last year, his mother told him to pray and read the Quran. Instead, the 25-year-old aerospace engineer dropped in on a packed appearance by Alireza Azmandian, Iran's most famous motivational speaker and self-help guru.

Now, he meditates by staring at a flickering candle and chants Mr. Azmandian's inspirational catch phrases.

"Religion doesn't offer me answers anymore," Mr. Bakhtiar says, after listening to Mr. Azmandian at a public auditorium in a shabby neighborhood of South Tehran. But, he says, "this seminar changed my life."

The self-help craze — long part of life in the Western world — is taking the Islamic Republic by storm. Iran is one of the world's youngest nations, with 70% of its 65 million under the age of 30. There's widespread disenchantment among young people with Iran's strict theocratic regime, which requires headscarves for women and bans alcohol. And jobs are scarce.

In other Middle East countries with similar demographics, like Egypt and Turkey, young people are increasingly turning back to their Muslim identity for solace. But Iran's mostly well-educated youth are more likely to seek other remedies — such as self-help seminars, New Age theories, meditation and yoga.

"The regime presumed it could mold the society into whatever shape and form it wanted, but we are seeing the opposite take place," says sociologist Hamid Reza Jalalipour. The younger generation is "turning away from conventional religion and tradition."

Every day, dozens of self-help seminars take place, some underground at people's homes and others in public venues, all around the sprawling capital and in some of Iran's bigger cities. "The Secret," the self-help tome by Australian author Rhonda Byrne and featured on Oprah Winfrey, tops the best-seller lists here. The Farsi translation is in its 10th printing.

State-owned television Channel Four has broadcast the book's companion video, shot in documentary style and distributed world-wide on DVD, four times in the past six months.

At newsstands in Tehran, over a dozen magazines are dedicated to the art of happiness with a New Age twist. Their pages are packed with ads promoting lessons about how to use feng shui to decorate your house; how to open your chakras; and how to awaken the financial genius hidden inside you.

At Book City, a popular bookstore here, Hiva Mohammadi, a 21-year-old interior-design student, clutched a stack of self-help books as she shopped with her mother, Vida Bahrami, 50. "It wasn't like this when we were young," Ms. Bahrami says. "I don't know what's gotten into this generation, but they are certainly not into religion."

Elham Sarmadi, editor-in-chief of the popular "Happiness" magazine, says the title's circulation has steadily increased every year for five years. A recent article: How to enhance your body-language skills.

Each issue of the magazine carries serialized excerpts of Ms. Byrne's book. In March, the magazine dedicated a cover story to Mr. Azmandian, the self-help guru.

Ms. Sarmadi sends her small staff to his seminars, which are inspired by "The Secret." The book's overarching philosophy is that human beings can transform their lives through their
thoughts and that positive thoughts work like magnets, attracting wealth, health and happiness.

A father of three, with a Ph.D. in industrial engineering from the University of Southern California, Mr. Azmandian, 55, says he was drawn to the motivational-speaker circuit when he was a graduate student in the U.S., after reading a few self-help books and seeing how his own life improved.

He returned to Iran in 1995 to teach at Tehran University and bought a small private office to promote positive thinking and self-help. He began by giving lectures to his immediate family and friends, then passed out fliers at parks. Now, his office has grown to an entire floor of a commercial building with 12 telephone lines that constantly ring. His business is called "The Center for Technology of Thought," and like his American counterparts, he has marketed his brand. Disciples can purchase Mr. Azmandian's two self-help books, flash cards, calendars, CDs and DVDs with motivational phrases.

His seminars draw tens of thousands in auditoriums and theater halls every week. On stage, he favors white suits — no tie — and holds a bouquet of yellow roses. At a recent session, about 1,000 attendees packed the large auditorium, swinging left and right to an upbeat Persian pop tune. Clapping, they chant his slogans to the music: "Yes, I can!" and "Tomorrow is ours to make!"

Mr. Azmandian says he studies American counterparts such as Marshal Silver, a renowned hypnotist, and Anthony Robbins, the motivational speaker and self-help writer. He stomps his feet forcefully on stage, snapping his fingers rapidly and roars his commands laced with humor. "I have control over my life, not God and not the regime," Mr. Azmandian bellowed at one recent session.

"Think of yourself as an eagle and not as a pigeon," he told the crowd, many of whom had traveled hours by bus from across the country to attend.

Iran's government routinely cracks down on behavior deemed un-Islamic, such as women eschewing headscarves and men sporting unconventional hairstyles and clothes. But officials have so far left Mr. Azmandian and the New Age trend alone.

The ultraconservative newspaper, Jomhori Islami, or Islamic Revolution, last year criticized the airing of the movie version of "The Secret," calling it sacrilegious. It left no room for "God's will," the backbone of Islamic values, the paper said. But it ran on state TV several times more. 

Mr. Azmandian says he's given lectures to commanders of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard, to clerics who lead Friday prayer sermons across Iran and to managers employed by Tehran's municipality. He is routinely invited to lecture at universities and factories, which are mostly state-owned. He shapes his lectures according to his audience, he says, and steers away from political talk.

"No other movement has received this kind of mass social endorsement in Iran," he says. "This will inevitably transform our society and the next generation."

Bakhtiar Khazaee, a 38-year-old maintenance engineer, has been attending Mr. Azmandian's seminars for a year. Every morning before starting work he slips the guru's DVD into his office computer. "I used to think every thing was God's will," he says. But "now I don't think this way anymore. I know that whatever I set my mind on achieving will happen."