

Iran: the 2006 Elections and the Making of Authoritarian Democracy.

By Babak Rahimi

It is now a well-known fact that post-revolutionary Iranian politics has undergone several dramatic changes since its inception when the Islamist government replaced the Pahlavi Monarchy in 1979. Divided into four different historical stages, the politics of the post-revolutionary period first experienced a constitutional moment, when the original founders of the republic created a legal order that was based on the Islamic law (*sharia*), interpreted and sanctioned by the Shi'i ulama, and modeled after a parliamentary system of government with a weak executive office. In such a legal establishment, the spiritual leader or the *valyat-e faqih* (or "the guardianship of the jurisconsult") would have the ultimate authority in the state apparatus; the *valyat-e faqih* would be the soul of the nation and the representative of the Hidden Imam, Mahdi, who will return at the end of time.

The death of the spiritual leader and founder of the republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989, led the way to the second stage, when the power of the unelected institution of *valyat-e faqih* was enhanced in an attempt to bequest greater state authority to the hands of the official clerical class of the government. Much of the attempt to bolster the office was to centralize power as the state faced major economic and political problems after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The move was also made to expand the office of *valyat-e faqih*, which, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, had lost some of its prestige and religious aura. The appointment of Khamenei as the new supreme jurist ruler in 1989 introduced a new phase in the development of the office of *valyat-e faqih*, with an enhanced executive powers backed by the revised constitution.

In contrast to the previous stages, the third episode began when in 1997 Iranians, especially the young, elected moderate Mohammad Khatami to the presidency with the aim that he would bring much needed political and social reforms to a country overtaken by clerical authoritarian government. Khatami's reformist agenda from 1997 to 2005 brought to light a new popular will for change that in many ways resembled Poland's "Solidarity" movement in the late 1980's. Although his reformist platform eventually

failed to introduce any significant changes, Khatami managed to start a new momentum for change. Likewise, his name is associated with concepts such as “civil society” or “democracy,” signifying the development of democratic consciousness in the country. This third stage can be best described as a moment in post-revolutionary history that gave new life to democratic rule, mainly advanced by young Iranians (both male and female) who make up nearly 70% of the population.

The fourth stage, also known as the era of “conservative consolidation,” began a period of hardline backlash against the initial years of the reformists’ attempt to move Iran in the direction of democratization and openness in the third stage of the postrevolutionary period.¹ Made up of former revolutionary guards (like the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad), militant volunteer corps (*besiji*), hard-line clerics based in cities like Isfahan and Qum, and backed by the spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the “conservative consolidation” began to take form with the 2004 parliamentary elections, when the Guardian Council rejected the candidacy of a number of prominent reformist politicians in place of conservative candidates. This electoral coup enabled those who favored the unelected institutions of the state to enhance their authority and to prevent the reformist from any major political office.

The 2005 presidential election, which introduced Ahmadinejad as a prominent political contender and the new president of the republic, further advanced the project of conservative consolidation with the full backing of Ayatollah Khamenei and ideologically-charged Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose organization is independent of Iran’s state military forces. This fourth stage can be best described as the most authoritarian period in the republic’s political history, coupled with its failure in the “liberalization” of the country and its expansion of state economic projects originally initiated under Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s two-term presidency (1988-97). The failure to follow through Rafsanjani’s economic policy is mainly due to an attempt by the hardliner faction of the Iranian government to consolidate power through the sole support of the Revolutionary Guard, which has consistently controlled and dominated market competition through the private sector since the late 1990s.

For the most part, the political force behind any revolution dictates an eventual process of bureaucratization, statization and, eventually, stagnation after years of fading

revolutionary momentum. But the process of “statization” also entails a process towards greater authoritarianism, which requires a post-revolutionary state to maintain authority by centralizing power and hardening its initial ideological zeal. But the fourth stage of the post-revolutionary Iran includes a unique and added feature, which is absent in a number of different revolutionary processes in modern history. In contrast to the former Soviet Union, People’s Republic of China and Cuba, elections play a central role in further consolidating the conservative leadership which is tied together by militant zeal and Islamist values.

On December 15th 2006 the Islamic Republic of Iran witnessed an unprecedented event in the course of the conservative consolidation. For the first time in the post-revolutionary era, Iranian voters participated in both local council and the Assembly of Experts elections on a single election day. The event marked a significant change in the electoral process with the advancement of two inherently opposing institutions: one democratic and the other oligarchic.

The local council elections were originally institutionalized under the former reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, in 1999 in a way to introduce local governance in a country with a long history of centralized power. The municipal assemblies aim to empower the local citizenry by enabling them to voice their concerns, interests and opinions through a locally elected body of representatives. These councils are democratic in nature since they involve the reconfirmation of two basic themes of democratic rule: accountability and self-determination.

The Assembly of Experts, however, is an institution with the function of maintaining a political system that is inherently unaccountable. It comprises a body of 86 senior clerics who are responsible for monitoring Iran's supreme leader and choosing his successor. It is a non-transparent institution since the assembly never reveals its topic of discussion or account of what its members discuss. But most importantly, it directly supports the unelected institution of *valyat-e faqih*, the office maintained by a male cleric of a high ranking stature as the head of the Islamic state until the return of the Hidden Imam, whose second coming is expected at the end of time. Thus far, the Assembly of Experts, has been under the control of the conservatives, particularly those hardliner clerics who are fiercely loyal to the Supreme Leader. In fact, it was the Assembly of

Experts that was responsible for electing Khomeini into office after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. The Assembly of Experts can be described as an oligarchic institution, composed of a selected body, the ulama or religious clerical class.

The main reason for simultaneously holding these two elections is two-fold. First, at a domestic level, there appears to be an attempt by the conservative authorities, who came to dominate the government since 2004, to give more popular legitimacy to the Assembly of Experts by correlating the re-election of its members with the municipal council elections, as though the two are inherently one and the same. Likewise, since the Assembly of Experts is directly responsible for the selection of the *valyat-e faqih*, the move is made in a way to make Ayatollah Khamenei look as if he is actually an elected member of the government.

There is something curious in the making here. With the successful marginalization of the reformist camp since the 2004 parliamentary elections, the conservatives seem to be promoting a culture of accountability and transparency through popular elections. This was the sort of policy that was once advanced by the reformists under Khatami. But the hardliners are now cunningly promoting democratic practices such as elections for the objective of advancing an undemocratic political system. In other words, elections serve the promotion of the authoritarian political order.

But there is a second consideration here which should also be borne in mind, and that is a foreign policy issue. Undoubtedly, the elections were devised in mobilizing popular support for the state's nuclear project, so passionately advocated by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad since his election to office in 2005. Although the outcome of the elections is also seen as a referendum on Ahmadinejad's performance in his first 18 months in office, the main purpose for these simultaneous elections is to show popular support for the government's controversial nuclear policy which faces growing international pressure. As the U.S. and its allies continue to put pressure on China and Russia to agree to place sanctions on Iran, Ahmadinejad and the conservative factions (both the pragmatists and the hardliners) are working hard to strengthen their ideological case for an indigenous nuclear program, which surely would promise them power and prestige on both domestic and international levels. In this respect, the elections serve the objective of marshalling mass support in legitimizing the development of the regime's nuclear

program for greater influence in the region. Popular support remains central to the government's nuclear policy, and in this regard elections play a key role.

Historically speaking, the level of participation in non-presidential elections has always remained low since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Most voters have always focused on the parliamentary and the presidential elections, disregarding these two elections as either irrelevant (local councils) or beyond their reach of power (Assembly of Experts). But the December 15th 2006 elections were an exception. For the most part, both of these elections were greeted with unprecedented enthusiasm. With 3,150 polling stations and 9,450 ballot boxes across the country, many Iranians cast their votes in crowded polling stations, making these elections some of the most popular since the 1997 presidential elections when Khatami established the first reformist government in the post-revolutionary era.

In the capital city, Tehran, streets and squares were covered with posters and placards of candidates running for office. Cell phones were flooded with text messages about the candidates. One text-message advertised the following: "Vote for Ahmad Masjed Jamei, the former minister of culture under Khatami." "Our national destiny is in the municipal elections," read another large slogan posted in a major square of the city. On the day of the elections, I visited many mosques and schools where the elections took place. The mood at the polling stations was festive and happy. Unmarried young men and women intermingled while older voters discussed politics and social issues as they waited in long lines. I spoke to a number of voters, especially the youth, about the elections. "It's fun," a teenager enthusiastically told me. A middle-aged high school teacher explained as he held his wife's hand on this cold, mid-December night, "It is my national duty. I vote so I tell America that I support my government, even if I am not free here."

There is a correlation between the uses of the two terms "National duty" and "government" that is not accidental. The elections, in a sense, create a collective sentiment of solidarity for the government as the embodiment of the national identity, despite the *undemocratic* nature of most of the governmental institutions. What the regime has successfully done since making the nuclear program a central tenant of its foreign policy agenda is to represent *itself*, the government of the clerics as a national and popular entity, the sort that would require the collective support of the Iranian people

against the supposed malicious “conspiracies” of foreign regimes. The elections represent a set of practices that bolster state power. The polling stations have become more than a place where elections take place; they are sites of nationalistic rites of passage (especially for the young), emotive and symbolic spaces in creating a collective sense of national solidarity against a perceived foreign threat.

On December 15th many Iranians cast their votes as a means to participating in a democratic process, but unwittingly also to solidify a political system that advances the electoral process to maintain an authoritarian regime. Such is the tragedy of elections under authoritarian rule. These four stages of the post-revolutionary era underline the complicated series of events that has led to the current political situation in Iran. Both domestic and foreign factors have contributed to the transformation of the Iranian state, especially the rise of the conservatives to power after 2004. The long-term project of the “conservative consolidation” may well last a long time, but it can never be permanent. In a significant way to jump-start reform and to challenge authoritarianism, Iranians, especially the young, should begin to realize that failure to show up for elections is a sure way to challenge authoritarian rule and, ironically, a way to bring democracy to their country.

Further Reading:

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¹ See Gheissari, Ali & Nasr, Vali, “The Conservative Consolidation in Iran,” *Survival*, vol. 47 no. 2 Summer 2005, pp. 175-190.