

Iran On Eve Of Elections

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Global Research, March 02, 2008

2 March 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach was in Tehran in late February and had the opportunity to talk to political figures, intellectuals, journalists, and the all-too-important "man on the street." The picture that emerged from this brief visit clashes fundamentally with the line promulgated by the international press, and, therefore, might be worth considering. Muriel Mirak-Weissbach brings us this exclusive report.

Although many detractors will claim that democracy has no value in Iran, the fact of the matter is that the future of the Islamic Republic may be decisively influenced by two rounds of democratic elections: those for the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) on March 14, and those for the U.S. President, House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate on November 4 of this year. The same detractors will claim that there is no basis for comparison between the two elections, given that the American vote is "free, fair and democratic," whereas the Iranian elections they see as "fixed." However, as is often the case with such political prejudices, reality may be completely different.

It was during our visit there that the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohammad ElBaradei, issued his latest report on Iran. The political establishment was elated and the national press joined in the general mood of celebration. As reported in the international press, ElBaradei had said, essentially, that the various unanswered questions regarding Iran's nuclear energy program, six in all, had been satisfactorily answered.

Most significantly, the IAEA secretary general's report confirmed that the {method} adopted by that agency and Iran in August, was functional; according to a breakthrough deal made at that time, the two sides agreed that all outstanding questions about Iran's nuclear program would be put on the table, and that Tehran would answer them, one after the other. Now, after ElBaradei's largely positive assessment, the United States came forward with "new" questions, based on intelligence gathered not by the IAEA but by American agencies, and, according to reports, agencies of "allies." The immediate supposition was that among such allied agencies might be Israel and the infamous terrorist organization, Mujahedeen e-Kalq (MKO), which enjoys the protection of Washington. The Iranian authorities immediately denounced such new "intelligence" as suspect or forged, and insisted that ElBaradei's findings be put on the record.

The United Nations Security Council is going ahead, nonetheless, with its plans for another resolution which is expected to add a few paragraphs to prior resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran. A few more entities will be subjected to economic sanctions, etc. Russia and China will probably go along with the operation, even though both were furious at Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which had been facilitated and hailed by Washington. Moscow and Beijing agree that Iran has the right to the peaceful use of nuclear

technology, but want to stop its enrichment program. Russia's prompt delivery of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr plant, over December-January, sent this clear signal: yes, we will provide you the means to start up your nuclear plant, but, since we are giving you the fuel, you don't need to produce it yourselves.

This is a major issue for Iran. As press reports have detailed, and several journalists as well as one government representative emphasized to me in discussions, this is a red line for Iran. The country has had enough experience with the great powers over decades, to know that it cannot trust promises. The 1953 overthrow of the democratically elected government of Mossadeq, by the U.S., on British demand, has not been forgotten. Mossadeq's "crime" was that he nationalized Iran's oil, i.e., asserted the nation's sovereign right to control its energy resources. The "Mossadeq reflex" is very much alive in Iran today. Not only: Iranians remember that, under the Shah, an ambitious program for civilian nuclear energy had been adopted, with the enthusiastic participation of the U.S., France and Germany, only to be trashed after the 1979 Islamic revolution. If Bushehr starts to produce energy, as planned, Iranian officials say, then the country needs to be sure it can continue to guarantee fuel. Recent interruptions in gas deliveries from Turkmenistan, underline the point: Iran has to be self-sufficient, and therefore must maintain its enrichment facilities.

Iranians Go To The Polls

On March 14, over 43.2 millions of Iranian eligible voters may flock to the polls to elect the 8th Majlis, or Parliament. The spin in the international press has been that, since many reformist candidates have been axed from the lists, the entire vote will be a charade. This is not accurate. True, a hefty number of aspiring candidates had been eliminated from the contest, by the Guardians Council, which according to the Islamic Republic's constitution, has the function of vetting candidates. But it was prevailed upon to readmit a large number, after protests had been lodged. Thus, after 7,597 initially presented their candidacy, 2,200 were disqualified, among them Eli Eshragi, the grandson of revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Following protests, including by former Presidents Seyyed Mohammad Khatami (who called the vettings a "catastrophe") and Hashemi Rafsanjani, many were reinstated, including Ali Eshragi, who, however, later withdrew. About 4,500 candidates are to run. As one Iranian friend put it to us, the system is a perfect democracy, but "under the umbrella" of the higher authorities, to wit, the Supreme Leader of the Revolution.

Westerners, especially Americans, may self-righteously huff and puff and complain about such procedures in Iran. But they might also take a hard and honest look at the ongoing U.S. election campaign, and reflect on how politically viable candidates like Dennis Kucinich, John Edwards, and Ron Paul, have been marginalized and eliminated, not by any Guardians Council, but by the combination of the press and the money spigots.

As a result of the candidates vetting process, and other factors, the reformists associated with former President Khatami, will not be in a position to win the elections. In all, it is estimated that the Khatami-linked reform candidates will be able to compete in 111 to 120 seats out of 290. Candidates associated with another reform list, the National Confidence Party of Mehdi Karroubi, say they will compete in 160 districts, about 55%. This means that, even if the reformists were to win all races, they would not have a majority in parliament. Their aim, as one reform politician told us, is to establish a strong minority in Parliament, one that will be able to exert influence on the government, although it will not be able to determine policy. (As an American, I often made the mental comparison with the situation in the U.S. Congress, where my Democratic Party gained the majority in 2006, and did nothing

with it.) All told, there will be about 16 candidates competing for each seat, and 29 for each seat from Tehran, the most important district.

In the capital, 30 candidates are required for the list, and 30 should be elected to Parliament. The Khatami-inspired reform group have appealed to the Karroubi group, to present a joint list, but this has not materialized as yet. The conservatives are known as the "Principalists" (Ousulqara), that is, those who adhere to the principles of the revolution. This is the faction identified with current President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, not all the principalists in the elections are loyal followers of the president. For example, former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, is leading a group from the General Principalists Coalition, but has distanced himself from some of the president's stances. In an interview with ISNA, the student news agency, he said he had "ideological differences" with Ahmadinejad, and criticized his economic policies. Larijani will run from the constituency of Qom, the holy city. In sum, there is a lively political debate which has unfolded, particularly over the manner in which Ahmadinejad has promoted the nation's interests. There are those who, agreeing with his overall policy, would prefer that he adopt a more conciliatory tone. Others differ widely with him on economic policy. Thus, in the elections, it is possible that, even though the conservatives retain their majority, even 65% according to some, it will not be monolithic politically.

Many among the reform politicians fear that the conservative forces will manipulate the vote, as was alleged they had done in the 2005 presidential elections. On February 10, Agence France Press carried a story, picked up from Iranian media, according to which General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Revolutionary Guards, openly called for voters to support the conservatives. "To follow the path of the Islamic revolution," he was quoted saying, "support for the Principalists is necessary, inevitable and a divine duty of all revolutionary groups." He was speaking to officials of the Basij, or Islamic militia, an organization of 10 million, which he heads. Former President Rafsanjani responded by attacking any such interference. "It is one of the main principles of the Islamic republic system," DPA quoted him saying on February 15, "that the military should not interfere in any elections." He said that "all those with fidelity to the Islamic republic" should be allowed to run, and that this "also includes different (from the government) political trends."

The key thing to understand about the political process in Iran is that, despite the constraints of the system, the population is anything but passive, or apathetic. People — in all age groups — are passionately engaged in politics, and most eagerly engage in discussions with foreign visitors, like us, from Europe. One point that they always stress is that they would be happier if there were normal relations with the U.S. and the West as a whole. It is a sobering experience to realize, in meetings with press as well as political representatives, that they are very pro-Western; many studied in the U.S. before the revolution; others, in the younger generation, grew up in the U.S., and returned to lend a hand to their homeland in its struggle to function as a normal member of the "international community." Anti-Americanism may be standard fare in official rhetoric, but it does not reflect the thinking or sentiments of the general population, at all. If there were a rational administration in Washington, all outstanding issues could be dealt with rationally, and solved, in short order, to the satisfaction of both sides.

The Issues

When Iranians go the polls on March 14, they will be voting for personalities, to be sure,

but also for policies. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has enjoyed the support of his people for his unwavering stance on the nuclear issue, but not for the manner in which he has handled it. The reformists are pledging to change this. Habibullah Bitaraf, a reform candidate who was energy minister under Khatami, called for “an active diplomacy” to go along with Iran’s “internationally acknowledged legitimate right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology.” He added his view that, “If our diplomacy was right, then we would not have the current tensions with the West and the sanctions.”

Uppermost in voters’ minds, along with the nuclear issue, is the economic crisis which is hitting not only Iran, but the world as a whole. Inflation has reached double-digit figures. An Iranian Parliament research center put inflation at 22-23% last year. For comparison, the rate is 7% in Saudi Arabia and 9.3% in the United Arab Emirates, both very high. The Iranian central bank is mulling over the issuance of a 100,000 rials note, whereas the highest denomination now is 50,000. Publicly, the authorities are putting on a brave face. Economics Minister Davoud Danesh-Jafari reported on February 16 at a conference in Tehran, that foreign investment in the country had topped \$10.27 last year, despite U.S.-led efforts to sabotage the economy with sanctions. He said economic growth had measured an annual 6.7% for the six months to September, and predicted continued growth despite sanctions. Danesh-Jafari also said Iran was looking forward to earning \$63 billion in oil income, for the year which ends in March.

But, privately, Iranians complain loudly about the rising cost of living. Given the record oil revenues, generated from an item selling at over \$100 a barrel, they want to know, where that money is going. Ahmadinejad is known for having spent a lot of time in his first two years in office, travelling to the provinces, where he has generously distributed funds, for a bridge here, a new highway there, and so on. This will certainly enhance his faction’s standing in the upcoming elections, particularly in outlying rural areas, but it will earn him no applause from city-dwellers, like the Tehran residents, who see their condition deteriorating. Although state subsidies continue to protect the prices of basic commodities, and the price of fuel is among the lowest in the world, young Iranians feel the brunt of the economic crisis the most: university graduates face a lack of job opportunities, and those who do find work, struggle to make ends meet, as rents have soared. Promoting marriage and families, one of the cornerstones of the current government, is no easy task, for purely financial reasons. The vulnerability of the president on economic issues was highlighted when Turkmenistan halted gas deliveries to Iran this winter. The extremely cold temperatures in the country brought on tragedy, as dozens of citizens perished in the cold, without adequate heat. In a highly unusual move, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly reprimanded Ahmadinejad, by explicitly ordering him to implement a law to supply remote villages with gas.

Social issues, though taking a back seat to the economic problems, do matter. Again, in private discussions, Iranians will scoff at the government’s increasing strictness on the dress code, for example. Women who allow too much hair to be visible under their head scarves or shawls, are accused of “bad Hijab,” and may be first reprimanded, then fined and even jailed, if guilty of multiple offences. Such emphasis on enforcing the Islamic dress code is viewed as symptomatic of the government’s tendency to lengthen the list of things that are forbidden.

Considering these developments, it is not difficult to understand why many Iranians may vote against the government. It must be stressed that Ahmadinejad won the elections in 2005, largely because of his promises to represent the poor, the unemployed, the old and

the young. Despite his hefty mandate, he has not redefined the structure of economic power in the country, and reports abound of an increasingly prominent role for the Revolutionary Guards in the economy, as well as politics.

Iran's Regional Role

No fair assessment of Iran's economic or political problems can be made without factoring in the continuing hostile attitude emanating from George W. Bush's Washington. Were there normal relations with the U.S., were there no economic sanctions, were there no threats of aggression (encapsulated in Bush's mantra, "No option is off the table"), then the internal political process in Iran would become even more vibrant and productive. Hopefully, such a change for the better will come with the U.S. elections in November.

One of the leading issues in the U.S. elections is foreign policy towards Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, a debate that educated Iranians are following with great interest. Whether the political pundits in the U.S. want to recognize it or not, a major development has just occurred in the region, which could and should impact the outlook of presidential hopefuls. This is the historic visit of President Ahmadinejad to Iraq on March 2-3.

The Iranian president arrived in Baghdad on March 2, and was given the red carpet treatment by the Iraqi authorities. He met with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, as well as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and several other ministers. Unlike the visits to Iraq made by officials of the U.S. occupying power, which are shrouded in secrecy due to security considerations and confined to the heavily guarded Green Zone of the capital, Ahmadinejad's visit was publicly announced beforehand, and was to include stops in the holy Shi'ite cities of Najaf and Kerbala. In the course of their talks, the two sides made a number of landmark agreements, including Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) on insurance cooperation, credit and trade arrangements (between the Export Development Bank of Iran and the Iraqi Rafadain Bank), and nine joint ventures, in the fields of cement, auto manufacturing, agriculture, food reprocessing, textiles, chemicals, petrochemicals, steel and electricity. Most important, the two sides sealed an agreement to link their power networks, through nine border points, whereby Iran will supply Iraq energy. In addition, Iran is to build a power plant in Najaf. Furthermore, there are plans to develop transportation infrastructure, both road and rail, as well as to expand cooperation in the energy sector.

The visit of the Iranian president to Baghdad cannot be underestimated. It represents not only a current foreign policy and economic policy victory for both sides, but, far more important, it potentially defeats the geopolitical strategy targetting both countries, over the last three decades. It should be recalled that, immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the U.S. together with Britain, Germany, France et al, moved to support Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, which opened the eight-year genocidal war. Genocidal, because, in the eyes of the Kissingerian thinktankers who issued the blueprints for the adventure, that war was intended to be a population war: each side was to destroy the other, much in the same fashion as the British in World War II initially hoped that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union would wipe each other out. Following the 1980-1988 war, the same geopolitical thinktankers hatched the idea of what was to become Desert Storm, to bring Iraq to its knees. The decade of the 1990s ushered in the new, soft policy known as "dual containment," whereby both regional powers, Iran and Iraq, would be held at bay through political and economic measures. Then came Bush's genocidal new war against Iraq, coupled with the deadly sanctions regime and permanent threats against Iran.

Whether through war or containment, the consistent policy approach of the geopolitical faction in the U.K. and U.S., has been to play Iran and Iraq against each other, in order to ensure that no cooperation between the two could come into being. That has now been shattered, with Ahmadinejad's historic visit to Baghdad. Now, Iran will be functioning as a helpful neighbor, contributing to rebuild war-torn Iraq. In a joint press conference March 2 with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Ahmadinejad said his country would rebuild Iraq: "We are willing to make major contributions to the development of Iraq's railway system, electricity generation, road construction, tourism industry and oil pipelines." Regardless of how many millions of dollars the various MoU may be worth, they are worth their weight in gold, if seen politically. Not only did they sign the cited MoU, but they pledged political cooperation as well. Ahmadinejad was on the mark when he identified the importance of Iraq for the region: "A united Iraq, a sovereign Iraq and an advanced Iraq is to the benefit of all regional nations and the people of Iran." Prime Minister al-Maliki reciprocated, saying "There was a high level of trust and I frankly say that the recent Iranian position towards Iraq is extremely helpful." He also indicated that his government would take appropriate action to expel anti-Iran terrorists in the Mujahedeen e-Khalq and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan.

If Iran and Iraq are allowed to fulfill the promise of this historic visit, it can only augur well for the entire region. It is to be hoped that the contenders for the presidency in the United States, will welcome the historic Iran-Iraq rapprochement as a harbinger of peaceful developments in the entire region.

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