

Report from Iran: The Elections and The Economy Put Ahmadinejad on Notice

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

As the New Year opens, U.S. policy on Iran will be one of the items high on the agenda of both the Bush-Cheney war party, and those institutional forces committed to imposing a new, sane policy for the entire region, as indicated in the Baker-Hamilton report. To this end, a firsthand overview of developments in Iran should be useful. This report is based on a two-week visit to Iran by the author, an American citizen, and her German husband. It aims at providing lawmakers as well as ordinary citizens with some insight into recent developments in Iran, as well as into how leading political figures are thinking. Two interviews with personalities from diametrically opposed camps, the government and the opposition, fill out the picture.

Iran's Election Surprise

Although the Iranian elections on Dec. 15 were not comparable to the earthquake provoked by the U.S. Democratic victory on Nov. 7, they took place in the same universe, and the tremors are being felt inside Iran and internationally. In those elections for city councils across the Islamic Republic, and for the Assembly of Experts (the body which elects, supervises, and can impeach the Supreme Leader), the moderate conservatives, so-called "pragmatists" and some reformists reasserted their presence on the political landscape, after having been overshadowed the last 18 months, by the forces of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, considered an extremist conservative or hardliner.

Most significant was the showing of Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had served as President for two terms after the Iran-Iraq War, but who was overwhelmingly defeated in the run-off election against Ahmadinejad in 2005. His humiliating defeat at that time was the result of an extraordinary mobilization of right-wing forces by Ahmadinejad, as well as widespread dislike of Rafsanjani, who had been tainted by rumors of corruption. According to reform politician Mohammad Atrianfar, a member of the Central Committee of the Khargozaran Party, that mobilization involved the deployment of the national paramilitary organization, the Basij, in the electoral process, in what was essentially a vote-rigging operation (see interview below).

Rafsanjani won this time around, coming in first place in the list in Tehran for the Assembly of Experts, with over 1.5 million votes. Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, a hardline supporter of Ahmadinejad, came in sixth, with about half as many votes. Other clerics allied to the President, and Mesbah-Yazdi failed to win seats.

Rafsanjani's victory was largely the result of the alliance forged in the campaign between his "pragmatist" (or "centrist") group and the reformists associated with former President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. Khatami campaigned energetically for a high turnout. As Atrianfar told *EIR* prior to the vote, a big turnout would be key for the reformists' chances. Khatami also campaigned openly for Rafsanjani, with whom he was photographed when the two cast their votes. The turnout was over 60%, a radical reversal of the low turnout of earlier elections.

Khatami had also stressed the importance of unity against the government, which is seen as authoritarian. "One lesson that has been learned for the Assembly of Experts vote is for Rafsanjani's supporters. They should appreciate unity and moderation," said the *Kargozaran* daily.

In the Tehran city council elections, it was the moderate conservatives, associated with Mayor Baqer Qalibaf, who were set to take 8 of the 15 seats, followed by 4 reformists and only 2 from the Ahmadinejad camp (one being his sister). Early reports indicated that in Shiraz and Bandar Abbas, not a single pro-Ahmadinejad candidate won.

Thus, the vote results were immediately hailed by the reformists and centrists, as a vote *against* the President. "The initial results of elections throughout the country indicate that Mr. Ahmadinejad's list has experienced a decisive defeat nationwide," the largest reformist party, Islamic Iran Participation Front, said. "These results were tantamount to a big 'no' to the government's authoritarian and inefficient methods," the party's statement asserted.

Although some Western press claimed that the Dec. 15 vote indicated the people's rejection of Ahmadinejad's staunch pro-nuclear policy, this is not accurate. Virtually no Iranian opposes the nuclear program, or the fact that the government is fighting for it. To be sure, some may feel that

Ahmadinejad's hardline stance is counterproductive, and that a more conciliatory attitude might be preferable. This is what is meant by the charges that the government's methods are "inefficient."

It is important to understand that Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in 2005 was an *institutional* move, by the real powers that be, to deliberately adopt a more aggressive stance on the nuclear issue. As one Iranian diplomat explained to *EIR*, Iran had tried a moderate approach, under Rafsanjani's Presidency, and had extended a hand to the West even more generously under the Presidency of Khatami, but had received nothing in return. Therefore, the establishment opted for a shift towards a harder line.

Despite the apparent weakening of popular support in these recent elections, Ahmadinejad is firmly in the saddle, in so far as institutional support, from the military, intelligence, and security sectors is concerned. He is also reported to have the complete backing of the Supreme Leader. This means that, unlike reform President Khatami, he has the power to deliver, and the power to negotiate with the United States, should that opportunity arise.

The War Danger

The first fact one has to consider in evaluating anything happening inside Iran, is that the country is being targeted for military attack and/or regime change, by the political forces associated with Vice President Dick Cheney, and the international synarchist banking networks behind them. These include political factions inside Israel, mainly grouped around Cheney's cohort Benjamin Netanyahu.

The war danger is not something you can feel in the course of day-to-day life. Walking down a crowded street in Tehran in the early evening hours, for example, when women, men, and especially young people are moving in throngs, doing their last-minute shopping, and exasperated drivers sit trapped in their stopped autos, waiting patiently for the traffic to move forward an inch or so, you would never have the impression that U.S. and Israeli armed forces were poised to launch aerial assaults on the country, even with nuclear weapons, as soon as the order were issued. The capital city has an estimated population of 15 million, and, judging from the permanent traffic jams, each and every Tehran resident must have a car. The youth make up 60% of the Iranian population, and they are the country's future. Now both land and people are targeted.

How the threat of a military attack is perceived in Iran varies, according to which social and political layers you are dealing with. Whereas the military is well informed and combat-ready, were an attack to occur, the political layers are less mobilized. Foreign Ministry sources told us that they had striven to convince the military that all the threats emanating from U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, President George W. Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and a string of

Israeli government representatives, were merely "psychological warfare" and "propaganda." Government representatives have repeatedly been quoted saying as much.

In the thinking of some Foreign Ministry circles, as long as discussions continue between Iran and the West—regarding the nuclear energy program, which has been used as the pretext for a crisis—then no military option can be launched. Some political figures, such as Dr. Hossein Shariatmadari, the representative of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and publisher of the influential *Kayhan* newspaper group, believe that the United States is so "bogged down" in Afghanistan and Iraq, that it is not in a position militarily or politically to start a new war (see interview). Others, particularly among intellectual circles who are powerful opinion-shapers, warn that this is a fallacious argument; true, they say, any military professional would agree that it would be foolhardy for the United States to launch a new military adventure, but that is a *rational* argument. What we are dealing with in the U.S. leadership, intellectuals such as Professor Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh stress, are fanatics, not rational, military professionals, who are "normal and sane."

As for the general population, it is estimated that 2-10% at most, have an awareness of the seriousness and imminence of a military attack.

All those who take the threat of a military attack seriously, concur that Iran's response would be immediate and total. Professor Pirouz stated unequivocally that such an attack would unleash unconventional, asymmetric warfare. U.S. naval units in the Persian Gulf region would be sitting ducks. "We could never attack the U.S. at home," said one political figure, "but now they are here, we have them trapped."

The Strait of Hormuz, said one newspaper editor, would be blocked, and "you could kiss the price of oil goodbye for years." Even without Iran's issuing orders to any foreign forces, groups and individuals sympathetic to its cause, would rally with military actions. As Professor Pirouz put it, "There are enough fanatical people in the Islamic world just waiting for a pretext to attack the U.S." Such a worldwide asymmetric war, in his view, would be worse than traditional "religious warfare," because we are dealing today with "political Islam," in which not only governments but individuals, have taken up the banner.

This does not mean that Iran wants war. As Dr. Shariatmadari noted, and as military leaders have declared, Iran will fight only if attacked. Significantly, President Ahmadinejad issued an open letter to the American people, on Nov. 29, entitled, "Isn't There a Better Way to Govern?" in which he denounced the "wars and calamities" caused by U.S. policy, with reference to Iraq, the Palestinians, and Iran, as well as to renditions, torture, and the limitations of civil liberties. Ahmadinejad then addressed the recent U.S. congressional elections: "Undoubtedly," he wrote, "the American people are not satisfied with this behavior and they showed their



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Tehran's Ayatollah Khomeini Mosque. The situation inside Iran, presented in this firsthand report, is far different from the monolith portrayed in the U.S. press.

displeasure in the recent elections. I hope that in the wake of the midterm elections, the administration of President Bush will have heard and heed[ed] the message of the American people."

The letter continues with a message to the Democrats: "The United States has had many administrations; some who have left a positive legacy, and others that are neither remembered fondly by the American people nor by other nations. Now that you control an important branch of the U.S. government, you will also be held to account by the people and by history."

The LaRouche Factor

No matter which political faction you talk to in Iran, whether the hardline conservatives, the moderate conservatives or the opposition reformists, all agree that the key to peace in the region, lies in Washington, D.C. Thus, an energetic debate has unfolded in the country, on U.S. policy towards Iran and the region. In this context, it should come as no surprise that LaRouche representatives should be welcomed, and their briefings on the Cheney war danger received with great interest, by representatives of all major political alignments.

In the space of ten working days, this author and her husband had as many media appearances. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which is the state-run radio and television, ran coverage of LaRouche's perspective on ten different occasions. Interviews on English, German, and Farsi language programs focussed on the danger of a military attack by the United States and/or Israel, as well as Dick Cheney's and Condi Rice's dreams of organizing a "moderate Sunni

Arab coalition" to oppose the "Shi'ite extremists," i.e., an alliance to support a military assault on Iran.

But most important was the discussion of the perspectives for a radical change in U.S. foreign policy, as a result of the Nov. 7 elections, which gave the Democratic Party a majority in both House and Senate. The role of the LaRouche faction, particularly the LaRouche Youth Movement, in mobilizing the youth vote in critical swing states, was the focus of broad discussion in all media events. Press representatives responded first with incredulity, then with enthusiasm, to briefings on the chances for double impeachment of Bush and Cheney, as the precondition for a radical, positive shift in foreign policy.

LaRouche's own extensive proposal for solving the Iraq crisis in the context of a regional program for Southwest Asia, was greeted with interest. Our visit occurred just prior to the release on Dec. 6 of the Iraq Study Group's report, which was certain to be read in the light of the LaRouche Doctrine. One question raised repeatedly was: How will Bush respond to the Baker-Hamilton report, if it indeed embodies LaRouche's approach? The other recurring question was: What can we Iranians do to help shift U.S. policy?

In addition to extensive media activity, there were meetings with government figures engaged in foreign policy, political figures from the conservative right to the reform left, and numerous influential intellectuals.

It's the Economy . . .

EIR's visit to Iran took place in late November/early December, just prior to the city council and Assembly of Experts elections. Although the outcome at the time was utterly unpre-

dictable, definite signs of protest against President Ahmadinejad were already visible. In fact, on Dec. 11, he was heckled by students during a university speech, for the first time in his tenure. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

As stated above, it is not the nuclear program which has turned some layers against the President; instead, as Democrat James Carville said in 1992, on the occasion of Bill Clinton's electoral victory, "It's the economy, stupid." Ahmadinejad's main support comes from the institutions associated with the clergy, as well as the intelligence and security apparatus, but also from the poor and the uneducated. It was these layers who provided the mass base of support for him in 2005.

However, as the first student protests indicated, and the recent elections have confirmed, Ahmadinejad is losing popular support. The reasons for this, aside from continuing debate about the legitimacy of the elections, are economic. After serving as mayor of Tehran for two years, Ahmadinejad pledged during the election campaign, that he would make major improvements in the economy, especially tending to the needs of the poor. As mayor, he had overseen some projects for road building and low-cost housing.

However, in his first year and a half in office, Ahmadinejad has not yet delivered on those promises. Instead, as his critics point out, he has made it a practice to travel to the provinces, and dole out favors to the local authorities. "If one province needs new roads, he gives them new roads; if another needs a new hospital, he gives them a hospital," one Foreign Ministry figure told us. In this way, the President has been building up a constituency among the provincial authorities by handing out monies from the Federal budget, which some would prefer to see invested in major projects for the entire nation. Their view is that the provincial governors are responsible for their constituencies and should take care of them, whereas the President should deal with national priorities. Although the price of oil on international markets has zoomed, the enhanced revenues have not been invested in visible projects.

One journalist told us of one Ahmadinejad program in which low-interest credit was made available to the general population, in hopes of stimulating consumption. However, seeking quick profits, most recipients of the cheap loans invested the funds in real estate, especially in the capital, with the result that housing prices skyrocketed. Rents also went up, creating a serious crisis for the less well-to-do. Another program distributed so-called "justice stocks" to the people, who would benefit from the profits. Such projects have led critics to conclude that the government is acting pragmatically on short-term plans, but has no overall national design. In the view of Professor Pirouz, this is "wishful thinking," not a policy.

The urgency of developing such a national economic program is underlined by the facts and figures published on the condition of the population. Iran is a country of 70 million

people, 60% of whom are youth. Given the high rate of unemployment, young people tend to go for university studies, even though they may still be without a job after graduation. Many new universities have been created in recent years, including private ones set up under Rafsanjani's rule, which require tuition fees. Intellectuals with whom we spoke complained that the plethora of new universities were not adequately staffed with highly qualified teachers, and that therefore such higher education did not meet expectations.

This young, highly politicized population can become the arbiter of developments in the country, as has been the case often in Iran's history. Students whom we talked with in Tehran, as well as Shiraz, openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the course of events, and are seeking fundamental change. It would be tragic if the only alternatives available to youth were to be life in the university, or activism in the Basij militias.

During the Presidency of reformer President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, from 1997-2005, hopes were high, particularly among youth, that real change could occur. He was voted in with an overwhelming mandate (70%) and he was reelected with almost the same percentage, for a second term. Yet, because he did not succeed in fulfilling their expectations, voters became demoralized and did not bother to go to the polls to vote in the next election. This demoralization, according to Mohammad Atrianfar, has been the greatest problem facing the reform camp, as it struggles to reestablish a political position in the country.

The longer-term perspective of the reformists, is for gradual evolution towards a more functional representative system, as Atrianfar outlined it in his interview. No doubt, this process is unfolding in that direction. However, the outside world is not going sit and wait for this process to play itself out. The world economic breakdown crisis and the war threat which it is generating, are ticking time bombs. For the Iranian leadership to come out of the crisis on top, it will have to mobilize the population—especially its majority youth—around a national economic development program, within a regional context. The new momentum generated in Washington with the release of the Iraq Study Group report, whose findings echo those of LaRouche's regional approach, are being read in Iran as a reason for optimism. It is Iran's critical contribution to the overall infrastructural development of Southwest Asia, which can fulfill the economic requirements of its growing population, and at the same time define a viable strategy for peace.

U.S. policy, with the new Democratic majority, can and must change. The Iranian leadership has signalled its willingness to contribute to regional stabilization, and to enter direct talks with the United States, if the conditions are right. Ahmadinejad has the power to do so, and recent pressures from the electorate are likely to urge him further in that direction. It is up to clear-thinking people in Washington to seize the opportunity.