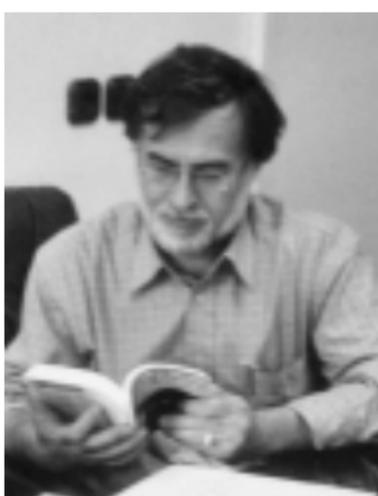


Iran Under Hardliners: An Insider's View

Mohammad Atrianfar is a political activist and close aide to former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani. He is the founder of three newspapers, *Hamshahri*, *Kargozaran*, and *Sharq* (the latter, recently closed). He was interviewed by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach in his Tehran office on Dec. 7, and spoke through an interpreter.

EIR: What is your view of the situation in Iran, considering the reports of a war threat?

Atrianfar: There are various views of the new situation of Iran, which can be divided into three categories. Some here are very concerned about a situation where the whole political structure of the region may be compromised; some think nothing will happen; and some believe the situation will get worse. I'm inclined to the third viewpoint.



The two viewpoints at opposite extremes belong to the radicals in Iran. Those who believe nothing will happen mainly belong to what are often called the hardliners in the right-wing camp. Mr. Ahmadinejad represents this viewpoint. This viewpoint can also be seen in the people affiliated with the Basij [see below], or others affiliated with the right-wing faction. Such a viewpoint is not far-fetched on the part of military people, because the military always talk tough; but politicians are expected to behave differently. So, we don't endorse these views of Mr. Ahmadinejad.

Of course, his views are not limited to Iran. They sometimes also threaten other countries—you can understand this in the way he wrote a letter to President Bush and in his speeches at the United Nations, from his position on the Palestinians, Israel, etc. This suggests these people think that Iran is the center of the universe and can bring about any change they want. This is also false and cannot be accepted.

There is a second group concerned about any change which may occur in Iran, mainly from the rich strata of Iranian society, because to retain their privileged status, nothing should happen, so that the status quo, their wealth, is not changed. From their point of view, there is no meaning to

political independence. . . . So this viewpoint has little following in Iran, about 5-10% of the population.

Those so-called hardline groups which are following Mr. Ahmadinejad, are about 15-20% of the population. Then there are 60-70% who fall in-between. These are the people who were represented over 16 years by the governments of [Hashemi] Rafsanjani and [Mohammad] Khatami. These 60-70% include technocrats, intellectuals, industrialists—mainly the middle class—who would like to have interaction with the outside world. They would like to preserve political independence while pursuing development, and reducing conflict, using a language of understanding with the outside world.

There is a strong, serious challenge between the first and the third groups. The hardliners now in power are just a minority of 20%, against a large majority of 60-70% who are out of power. This large majority is like the body, and the head—the 20%—now controls everything. This is what the current picture of Iran is.

Logic would stipulate that the 60-70% majority should be in control. But this is not happening, and I will elaborate on this. We believe that this minority group, now in power, took power not in a legitimate way.

EIR: Were they not elected?

Atrianfar: Yes, we endorsed the [2005] elections, but they were flawed. Not like the U.S. elections, but more like Watergate: they were prearranged. Let me elaborate on one aspect: The big national organization called the Basij, is a big militia which enjoys the complete support and financial backing of the government. Legally, this militia is not allowed to interfere with the electoral process, according to Khomeini, the founder of the revolution. It is an 8 million strong network, mainly Iranian teenagers, about 70% of them; the rest are older. Of these 8 million, 3 million are organically connected to the organization. Millions have gone to this organization in the 27 years since the revolution. This structure is run according to military codes of behavior. In military management, loyalty takes precedence over reason. This is right, because the military who have to fight wars, have to listen to their commanders; if ordered to fight, they can't say they want to think about it. That's fine for the military. But if you use a military structure as a political tool, those who are in good with the commander, can go to battle and win the battle.

What political activists criticize is that this military structure was heavily involved in the [2005] elections. This was opposed by Mr. Rafsanjani and by Mr. Karroubi, and all reformist parties protested. The Supreme leader [Ayatollah Khamenei] was expected to intervene, to organize a fact-finding team to look into the Basij involvement. From three to four months prior to the elections, some 400 opinion polls, scientific surveys, were conducted, locally, regionally, and nationally. None indicated a win by Mr. Ahmadinejad.

What happened? Is it possible that an unidentified, unknown person could win? Or is it a miracle, though we say the era of the Prophets is over? Or, there must be irregularity, vote rigging.

Besides, the performance of Ahmadinejad in the first year, has been such that he has alienated many of his wise supporters, even many people in his government, his cabinet. So, Ahmadinejad was not democratically elected, although there was the appearance of a democratic process. It was influenced by forces from the outside. . . .

EIR: What about the upcoming elections?

Atrianfar: We believe, if sound elections are held and outside forces don't intervene, the reformists will win. Of course, when the urban middle class feels with its sixth sense that there are exterior forces intervening in the elections, they feel marginalized from the process.

I maintain that in *any* elections—for Parliament, the President, the Assembly of Experts—if the turnout is 55-60%, the reformists will win; if the turnout is 40% or 45-60%, the result will be contentious between these two groups; if the turnout is under 40%, the reformists will lose. So the reformists are synonymous with legitimacy and a large turnout; the rule of the so-called hardliners is synonymous with weaker legitimacy and a lower turnout; and an authoritarian, totalitarian system of government.

EIR: The problem seems to be to mobilize, to overcome demoralization. On our first visit to Iran, in 1997, just after the election of Khatami, there was great optimism in the population. Then in 2002-03, we saw pessimism. So it is a question of mobilization and morale, especially among the youth. This was the decisive factor in the Nov. 7 U.S. elections.

Atrianfar: That's completely right. Let me elaborate on why that mobilization did not happen [in 2005]. The main problem is, the parties are not allowed to institutionalize and become strong. In political activity, our new Constitution, which is about 25 years old, has a provision for the establishment of political parties, yet no real political parties have been established.

There are three reasons for this: 1) Some Iranians see parties as a sign of division, not unity. This is not related to the government, but is deep in society. 2) Iran's way of government, historically, had featured anarchy, then kings, royal families, treated with awe. Iranians are not good at teamwork, it is said, even in sports; we are not good at soccer, but at wrestling. This is characteristic of Eastern societies. 3) The theocratic structure of government: The clerics are one political party and they are in power now. Naturally, they don't allow other political parties to come to power. This clerical establishment only allows those parties to grow directly under its influence. Even if a clergyman, low ranking, or middle rank, or senior, were incompatible with the party, he could not make changes, but would be kicked out.

EIR: Are there such clerics?

Atrianfar: Yes, Montazeri, Shabestari, even Rafsanjani, who is being pressured for this reason. Consider Rafsanjani, a clergyman, a senior aide to Khomeini, acting commander-in-chief in the war, then President, an intelligent person with a macro-plan for reconstruction: There are those trying to drive him from power now because he is not compatible with the traditional clerical power structure. This should not be interpreted to mean that I oppose clerics; that is not so. But in the new political atmosphere, political activities should be in tandem with the political traditions of the outside world, which recognize that parties are not based on sectarian tendencies. We believe clerics can engage in political activities but not create obstacles for other political parties. These are the problems which do not allow a sound movement to emerge as a political party, in agreement with us.

The second problem is that political activities, based on a clerical power structure, have involved the powerful organization of the Basij, which they're bringing into all elections. So, it's difficult to be hopeful. Nonetheless, I am optimistic. I might be stupid to be in politics, but I'm here and I think we will win. In a simple analysis, we shouldn't enter politics, we should stay out, but I think we have to resist. Why? Because we have an intelligent population, a high-level, strong, urban middle class which can support a party structure. We believe, if we can hold on for 10-15 years, we can overcome the three "reasons" why parties don't function, (the idea they are divisive, traditional convictions, and the clerical party structure). Then we can base a party structure on the urban middle class, the carriers of democracy in Iran. This transition will take about two generations, which is logical, if compared to Europe or the United States.

EIR: A friend of ours in Iran told us on an earlier visit, that he thought the reason why Khatami had failed in putting through a reform agenda, was that he was not prepared to challenge the system as a whole, mobilizing people into the streets, for example, for fear of a bloodbath. Khatami made many attempts at reform, presenting bills on the power of the Presidency, the economy, etc., but they were blocked by the Guardians Council. Could this be attributed to a problem in the system as a whole?

Atrianfar: First, I totally defend the achievements of the 1979 Revolution. We believe that Imam Khomeini was not in any way in contradiction to democracy. Secondly, despite his old age, his thinking was very young. . . . Whenever he saw something new in the world, he supported it, for example, his agreement with voting in elections, forming the Majlis (parliament), shaping the judiciary, in tandem with the needs of the modern world, developing a Constitution—all things one would not expect from an old man. Thirdly, Imam Khomeini was concerned about the ossified clerical elements who do not favor innovations.

Imam Khomeini was alive until ten years after the revolu-

tion. His focus for the first two years was dealing with internal conflicts, coups, civil strife. The next [eight] years were spent running the war, so he had little chance to develop the political institutions he founded. I believe that the system he founded, after his death, moved away from his ideas. The current leader, Mr. Khamenei, is an open-minded person, but he does not have the strength needed to cope with the ossified clerical establishment, and is concerned with them. And because of some tough moves by some movements who gave the impression that they wanted to uproot the clerical establishment, Khamenei defended the system.

Khatami and Rafsanjani do not have the power to weaken the political structure of the clerics. Things must run their own course. It may take 10 to 15 years. That's why I believe that, though Khomeini was older, his thinking was younger, more inclined to innovation. Khomeini's charisma was stronger. That's why you can say, in comparison, Khomeini was more efficient than Khamenei.

I agree that Khatami did not challenge or risk a bloodbath. There is a classic example in Iranian history I want to cite. It's the Mongol invasion about 800 years ago. The Mongols were simple people, and the Iranians, who were intelligent, served as their viziers and advisors. The Mongols were very violent, but the existence of the intelligent Iranians around them allowed Iran to be free of the effects of this violence.

There was an Emir (like Mullah Omar of the Taliban), who had the last word and was like a god on Earth for the Muslims. He was in control of people's lives; this was a Sunni concept. Iran was the center of Shi'ism. One of the Mongol Emirs had a vice president, named Haje (Mullah) Nasir-al-din al-Tusi (from Tusi, near Mashhad). Hulagu Il-Khan was the Mongol leader. He set out to invade Iraq, brought down the Mesopotamian government, and occupied Baghdad (in 1258). He wanted to kill the Caliph and undo everything. Hulagu was also a Muslim. The Sunnis believed that, since the Caliph is God's representative on Earth, if he were killed, the entire universe would come apart. The Caliph was terrified. Nasir-al-din told the ruler not to kill him. He said he had a way. He knew that nothing would transpire if the Caliph were killed, but he couldn't raise his objection. Hulagu was a firm believer and was afraid of the people's ignorance. Nasir-al-din said, "I have a suggestion: Let us wrap up the Caliph in a mat, and roll him over, and then look up at the sky to see if it is coming down. If anything happens, we will let him go, but otherwise, we'll keep rolling." This way, he killed the Caliph. He confirmed the ignorance of society, but carried out his own will and confirmed his own power. This has been turned into a proverb.

Some complicated problems in Iran can be solved with this mat-rolling method. If you are dealing with a wild horse, you might get kicked and get hurt; you have to be careful, and see if you can mount it, and ride it.