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USADI Commentary

Iran's Electoral Farce

Iranians know it full well: The upcoming June 17 presidential election in Iran is a farce, a futile attempt by the ruling regime to give itself an aura of legitimacy so its advocates and apologists abroad can justify their lucrative commerce with Tehran. The June election therefore must be viewed only from the prism of factional rivalries within the clerical rule.

Since coming to power in 1979, the ruling theocracy in Iran has used elections to serve the clerical establishment, which is built on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, the absolute supremacy of clerical rule. All institutions of power in Iran such as the Guardian Council, the Parliament, the Assembly of Experts and many other local councils provide a veneer of democracy and popular participation. Their main task, however, is to safeguard the pillars of the theocracy.

To this end, the June election will be no different from the other two dozens held since 1979. The Guardian Council, which acts as a vetting body to filter out those deemed un-Islamic and disloyal, has disqualified every candidate except eight: four former senior Revolutionary Guards commanders, two top mullahs, and two establishment figures turned "reformist".

According to Iran's Constitution only those with unfettered allegiance to the *velayat-e faqih* could become a candidate, making it impossible for Iran's genuinely democratic political forces, which appropriately reject the whole *velayat-e faqih* doctrine to run. Indeed, every election since 1981 has been boycotted by the democratic opposition.

Call them reformist, pragmatist, conservative, the fact remains that those running in the election, the "crazy eight" as they are known in Iran, are absolutely committed to preserving the terror-mongering theocracy.

The first four years after Khomeini's death in 1989, the so-called moderate Rafsanjani's band wagon was packed with many leaders of Western capitals. The following four years, however, was marked by people stepping on each other to get off it.

In 1997, Khatami's band wagon was even more crowded and the second Clinton administration was fully on board. Indeed, Khatami's presidency was the height of a delirium in Washington, Paris, London, and Berlin, which suffered from a paralyzing notion that with the "Ayatollah Gorbachev" at the helm, Iran was going to be on its way toward a major rehabilitation.

With hollow rhetoric about the "rule of law" and "civil society" at home and "dialogue among civilizations" abroad, Khatami became the darling of the West. The most fundamental fact about Iran was lost on the Europeans: Iran's *velayat-e faqih* system of governance is structurally and intrinsically incapable of democratic change. The notion of democracy co-existing with *velayat-e faqih* is a delusion whose propagation has only served to prolong the clerical rule.

The misreading of Khatami's presidency was not just a futile theoretical exercise in political science. It indeed played a major role in perpetuating the false notion of "change from within" the theocratic system and resulted in all-out policy of appeasement by capitals on both sides of the Atlantic.

While Khatami was being given red-carpet welcome in Europe, Tehran was relentlessly perusing its secret and ambitious nuclear weapons program and expanding its terror network across the globe. While fascination with Khatami's citation of Western philosophers became fashionable in our policy circles, public execution and amputation of limbs and death by stoning inside Iran continued unabated.

Eight years on, one would expect that lessons have been learned and the era of drafting policy based on the illusion of change from within the theocracy has come to a definitive end. Alas, that's not how the EU's big-3 is dealing with Tehran. There is a growing, albeit exceedingly dangerous, tendency to pin the success of the otherwise failed nuclear talks with Tehran on Hashemi Rafsanjani victory in the upcoming elections.

The suggestion that Rafsanjani, a disgraced murderer and godfather of Tehran's nuclear weapons program, could play this role speaks volume of the appeasement camp's desperation. They know full well that once appeasement of Tehran rogue rulers has been put aside, there is no other option except recognizing the indigenous anti-regime movement in Iran that is seeking to establish a secular democratic government.

The lucrative trade with Iran, in light of the mullahs' readiness to auctioneer the country's national wealth in exchange for diplomatic and political incentives, prevents the EU-3 leaders and their Europeanist allies in Washington from realizing that only when Iran is free of tyranny, there would be an end to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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The Christian Science Monitor

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At Tehran's grand bazaar, a season of discontent

TEHRAN - It was once the spiritual core of Iran's Islamic revolution, where popular anger and financial support welled for the movement that swept away the Shah in 1979 and propelled the mullahs to power. But today, Tehran's grand bazaar - a sprawling indoor retail mall selling everything from Persian rugs to women's bikinis - is host to very different sentiments.

Instead of loyally supporting the Islamic regime, this bastion of political and religious conservatism is reflecting the seething resentments and discontents now finding expression across Iranian society.

The sum manifestation of the bazaar's dissatisfaction is a widespread intent not to vote in next month's presidential election, in which eight candidates - of 1,014 initially registered - have been cleared to run by the watchdog Guardian Council.

"We won't vote for any of them - they are robbers," said Hasan, a textile wholesaler. Hasan's threat, echoed by fellow traders, presents a grim prospect for leaders who hope for a high turnout to establish their democratic legitimacy.

Hasan should be one of the regime's most fervent champions. Fidgeting with prayer beads, he removes from his wallet two photos of turbaned clerics whom he says are close relatives. "I am from a clerical family," he explains. "I campaigned in 1979 for the forces of [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini to get rid of the Shah. But this religion has got us tied by our hands and feet."

Voicing the heretical opinion that the system of velayet-e faqih (infallible rule by a supreme religious jurist) is inappropriate for Iran, he goes on: "The first characteristic of a marja-e taqlid (a senior cleric with a following) should be courage. None of them have that. In the past, if somebody insulted clerics, you would argue with them. But why should we do that now? Why shouldn't we criticize them if they have been lying?"

Hasan's accusations range from the general to the specific. He says authorities lied about Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian photographer who died of injuries sustained in custody after she was arrested for taking photos of a demonstration two years ago...

Within this seemingly inchoate potpourri lies a theme: unhappiness with 26 years of Islamic rule. Into this comes the election, scheduled for June 17. The front-runner is Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a two-time former president, who claims he can heal the rift between reformers and hard-liners. Mr. Rafsanjani, who was president between 1989 and 1997, also says he wants to ease tensions with America...

"I don't think anyone will vote for Rafsanjani," said Ali, another textile wholesaler. "During his first presidency, there was widespread poverty. The only people who will vote are those government employees who need the election stamp on their documents to keep their jobs. The bazaar is still conservative, but our souls have been killed."

NBC Nightly News

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Iran remains a study in contrasts

SOUTH OF TEHRAN, Iran — Tehran is a city of great contrasts in a land with a split personality. Is the future of Iran young men with long hair talking on cell phones or is it masses gathered for prayer? Is Iran a country prepared for the 21st century or one stuck in the last 30 years?

It pretends to be a democracy, with presidential elections in two weeks. But in Iranian politics, there's a higher power. Whichever candidate wins the presidential election on June 17, one man still will have all the power.

He is Said al Khamenei, the keeper of the flame of Ayatollah Khomeini and the nation's supreme religious leader. The politicians have elections; Seyed Ali Khamenei runs the country.

One of the political clerics claims he can change that. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is a conservative former president who is now talking vaguely about improving relations with America. But Iranian students I spoke with expect no real change.

"Many people in Iran don't want to vote in this election," said one.

They've heard promises of reform before. Will they vote? "No, of course not," said another. "It's not in the way of democracy."

At Friday prayers, the invocation is, "Marg bar Amrika." In case you don't recognize the chant, it is "death to America." We first heard it in 1979, when Iranian students seized the American Embassy and took hostages in a long and dangerous standoff. That was the end of U.S.-Iranian relations and the peak of power for Khomeini. Today, the old walled-off embassy is a headquarters for the Revolutionary Guard and a billboard for anti-American slogans. But it draws little attention.

The Iranian economy is a much larger issue. With its rich oil and gas deposits, Iran should be one of the most prosperous nations in the world, but everyone agrees the Iranian economy is a mess. It's a combination of corruption, state mismanagement, high unemployment and hyperinflation... There are a million young Iranians entering the job market every year and only half that many jobs. And no one has any answers.