

Iran's road to democracy

Mohsen Sazegara

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The Islamic Republic of Iran's presidential election of June 2005 will be a vital moment for the country. But, says Mohsen Sazegara – a former regime loyalist turned vocal critic – even more important is that Iranians campaign to make their constitution democratic and secular.

A quarter-century has passed in Iran since the revolution of February 1979. This can be called the period of “three republics”. The first began with the revolution, lasted throughout the 1980-88 war with Iraq, and ended with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. The second was the era of consolidation of state institutions under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani from 1989-1997. The third was ushered in by the election of President Mohammad Khatami on a reform platform in 1997.

The third republic will end with the election of a new president in June 2005. What will replace it? Where is Iran going? The best way to answer these questions – which are far wider than the mere identity of the new president – is to understand how these twenty-six momentous years have changed Iran as a country and we Iranians ourselves.

Three generations, five transformations

Iranians today belong to three generations. The first, my own, I call the “generation of the revolution”: people now in their 50s and 60s who were actively

involved in the revolution. We belong ideologically to the mid-1960s and were heavily influenced by revolutionary discourses. Now, we have occupied every position of power in the country, and we don't want to step aside or open the way for others. Not only in the government, but in the opposition too!

The second generation is the “generation of war”: people who were under 20 years old at the time of the revolution, and are now in their 30s or 40s. They came to maturity during the Iran-Iraq war, when 265,000 Iranians died, mostly young men (around 700 people were killed during the revolution). This generation, who got involved in social and political affairs after the war ended, believed in what we said even more than we did. They had ideals, and were prepared to sacrifice everything. I have to say that they were really pure. Now, they are disillusioned and have become passive. I like the second generation very much and have many friends amongst them. They are really good people.

The third generation are people in their 20s and younger – the majority of the country's population. This generation, our children, knows little and cares less about the revolution or the Shah. You had your

revolution, they say, but we have a different agenda. We want jobs. We want comfort. We want life. We want happiness.

During this post-revolution historical cycle, Iran has undergone a profound social transformation. This has five key, and interrelated, dimensions: demography, education, technology, travel and ideas.

First, there has been a vast increase in population, from 35 million in 1979 to 69 million in 2004. Moreover, Iranians are increasingly city-dwellers: the urban population is approaching 70% – at least half of them in the capital, Tehran. This is a striking change in a country where the vast majority of people have historically worked on the land.

Second, for the first time in Iran's history the majority of the population can read and write. Around 92% of the young are literate. There has also been an expansion of university education, and it is significant that more than 61% of all university students are girls. During their school years, they must be at home, and they do not have opportunities to be involved in society as boys do. One result is that they study more and better, and almost every index of public behaviour – voting, social affairs, employment – reflects this.

Third, Iranians are communicating with each other more than ever before. There are 3-5 million internet users in Iran – perhaps the highest number in the middle east. The young generation in particular is online and blogging; there are 60-70,000 weblogs, making Persian the fourth most-used weblog language. Internet cafés abound.

Over 3 million homes have satellite television – and the average Iranian family has 4.6 members. These people can watch Voice of America, CNN, BBC World, and over 700 other stations. BBC radio has more than 7.5 million listeners in Iran; the BBC's website has more than 250,000 Iranian visitors every day. The most popular newspaper in Iran has a circulation of around 450,000.

All this is a window on the outside world for Iranians. The regime tried to interfere with satellite waves in Tehran two years ago, but the effort was difficult, expensive and controversial. It's simpler to prevent shortwave radio, and some websites have been blocked. But if the regime tries to close channels of

communication, they'll have to close everyone's minds and isolate Iranians from the world. The changes of the last twenty years have made that impossible.

The fourth of these changes is that Iranians are travelling back and forth more than ever. Around 2 million Iranians live outside Iran – mostly in western Europe, Canada, and the United States, but there are large numbers too in Japan. Every summer about 200,000 Iranians travel abroad, and approximately 400,000 Iranians return for a visit. So there is an active conversation going on: people talk about the world, about the future of Iran, everything.

This is bad news for the regime in another respect. After the revolution, foreign travel without permission was banned and the country closed. Now, many people face problems in acquiring foreign visas, which leads them to ask themselves: why do we have a government like this, such that no one wants to issue visas to us?

This interaction is only the latest phase in a long historical reality. Iranian people, throughout our history, have always been active in the international realm, encountering other societies and their ideas. Ordinary people as well as intellectuals follow what is happening in the outside world, in the west especially.

Fifth, there has been an explosion of new ideas in Islamic intellectual life. This started during what I have called the "second republic" with a circle of intellectuals around journals of reformist theology, and quickly spread among university students.

This trend arrived in the context of an exhaustion of ideas among what I call the four political tribes in Iran: Marxists, monarchists, nationalists, and Islamists. Now, at this juncture in Iranian history, all four approaches have reached a dead end. A new paradigm is emerging.

An Iranian odyssey

My own experience as a member of the "generation of the revolution" helped convince me of this.

A formative moment came in 1984. I was then deputy minister for heavy industry and president of the Industrial Development and Renovation Organisation. Something happened that made me say to myself: something is going wrong in this country. But we were

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in the middle of the war with Iraq, and I felt I had to stay in the government. It took about a year before I resigned.

With the end of the war in 1998, and the death of Imam Khomeini in 1989, I decided I needed time to study. I refused offers of a variety of posts in the new government, saying that I would prefer to study history. I gradually realised that there were big mistakes in the underlying ideas of the revolution. I saw a kind of fascism at work in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

As a result of this rethinking, I re-entered the arena of politics. In 2001, I forwarded my name to be a candidate in the presidential election; I knew that the unelected clerics in the Council of Guardians would refuse to register me, but my real purpose was to begin a conversation, especially with students.

I went to many universities to campaign. Perhaps 30% of the students backed me, 70% voted for Khatami. My platform was the constitution. I argued that the problem is Iran's constitution and the laws that flow from it, and that to change them is the first, necessary step. The constitutional issue has become paramount because the country is now at a crisis point. There is huge dissatisfaction with the way the country is governed; the overwhelming majority of young Iranians are against the regime. This situation is really dangerous.

In such circumstances, with the current constitution in place, the presidency means nothing. President Khatami possesses no real power. So the goal must be to change the constitution and make the position of a democratically elected president meaningful.

My campaigning in 2001 and an essay entitled "The Last Word, the First Step" made me a target. In March 2003 officers of the ministry of intelligence arrested me at home. I was charged with making propaganda against the regime. In response, my wife announced that I would go on a hunger strike, and some friends proposed that I become mayor of Tehran under the auspices of a National Coalition of Liberals in town council elections. They printed a poster of me and handed it out in the streets, called a press conference and declared that their "mayor" was on hunger strike in jail.

The description of me as mayor was a pressure on the regime, because according to the law, a directly elected council chooses the mayor. My friends said that if the people elect us, we in turn will elect Mohsen Sazegara mayor of Tehran. The regime made its calculations, and after five days they released me.

I was arrested again in June 2003, and again started a hunger strike. It lasted seventy-nine days, with a two-week break in the middle. I am writing a book about it, called *Prison in Prison*.

The reason for the break was that the authorities told me they were agreeing to my three demands – that the regime tolerate non-violent opponents like me, release the 800-plus university students who were arrested with me, and that the regime (in the form of the supreme leader himself) apologise to the nation for this mass incarceration. My own son was one of those arrested. He was kept in an isolation cell for twenty-five days; some were held in such cells for eighty-five days.

I had twice tried a "dry" hunger strike, but my heart disease meant I could only last for around thirty hours. So this time, I fasted on sugar and water – three cubes of sugar in the morning, and three at night. My blood pressure still went up and up, and eventually I collapsed. So after fifty-six days they rushed me to the hospital and put me on an intravenous drip. I tried to resist, and they fastened my hands to the bed. But I didn't let them add any liquid protein to the drip – just water and a little bit of sugar and salt.

Tehran's attorney-general, Saeed Moratazavi, visited me and said that my three demands were being met. As a result I ended my hunger strike. About ten days later I was released from the hospital on condition I pay a bail of \$800,000 which they said could be part-secured if I handed over the title-deeds of my father's and brother's houses. When an officer of another branch of government came to arrest me on a new charge, it was clear that the attorney-general had lied; he had tricked me.

I told the authorities that if you don't keep your promises, I will restart the hunger strike. And so I did. This time I quickly became weak, and they sent me back to the hospital. I was there for another twenty-three days until I was returned to jail. They said I would be kept there indefinitely. I was sure my death was imminent.

I knew nothing about what was happening outside. My wife came once to visit with my mother, but the conversation was monitored. On my release, I found out that people at one university had held a candlelight vigil after a rumour that I had died. Several other universities announced they would hold their own vigils on behalf of all the political prisoners. I was released two days before they were due to be held, and I think they were the most important reason for my release.

Since then, I have been sentenced to a year in prison for propaganda against the regime. Five more accusations have been made against me, carrying a possible penalty of twenty years in jail. One is action against national security, which consists of nothing – a speech I made at a university; another is having a relationship with foreign spies, a more serious charge. The evidence is interviews I have given to a Radio France broadcaster who is supposed to belong to a pro-democracy association in France controlled by the CIA.

None of these experiences have stopped or will stop me from expressing my own ideas about what Iran needs: a new intellectual and political paradigm.

The politics of reformation

Those in power in Iran have created a fascist version of Islam – an absolutist and authoritarian system. Everything has to be unified, singular, one, a total state. They even use the methods of fascism, like that militia of thugs, the Revolutionary Guards. They are called “white shirts”, a variant of Nazi Germany’s “brown shirts”. They are at every demonstration in Iran, violently attacking all opposition groups.

But now things are really changing. That’s what I told my interrogators: “it” has happened and is happening in Iran. By “it” I mean one thing: the promise of democracy.

This promise is being led by what I call the “reformation movement”, based on a fourfold set of principles: democracy, human rights, civil society and involvement in the international community. This is something much wider and deeper than the “reform process” of President Khatami, which is now dead.

It is vital to grasp that the reformation movement precedes Khatami’s election in 1997 and will outlast him. His reform process was not, as many now claim, from the first a conspiracy to give the regime a new face and thereby make it last longer. I think that it was not wrong that people’s demands for change, modernity and freedom led them to vote for Khatami.

The impossibility of reform became apparent only two years after his election. The problem is that the underlying framework of the existing constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran is structurally incompatible with achieving the goals the reformers have set – democracy, human rights, and secular pluralism. In this constitution, the leader is all-

powerful. He can ratify everything and can veto anything – and the people are at his mercy.

Article 4 of the constitution says that no law, statute, or order in the country can be against Islam. The six clerics who are the main part of the Council of Guardians granted themselves the authority to interpret what is and is not against Islam. The leader ratifies them.

No democracy can be made out of Iran’s constitutional law. Iran’s problems are essential to the nature of the regime. And so it must be changed. This is the lesson of “reform”.

So what is to be done? How can the “reformation movement” succeed where the “reform process” failed? The answer is to mobilise civil society behind a referendum campaign to create a new constitution. This is the key: if you change the constitution, everything will change.

To this end, several colleagues and I have begun a campaign for a referendum on the constitution. This started with eight original signatories – including a student movement leader, a dissident who spent over six years in prison, a lawyer who is in jail now, a human rights activist whose husband is now in jail, and me. We put it on the internet and invited all Iranians to sign it.

More than 35,000 people have done so – including 300 prominent writers, scientists, and intellectuals. The regime has censored the site and blocked access to it, but we have invited people to add their names by email.

The regime will almost certainly block the referendum before it can be put to a ballot. The way to defeat this is to apply pressure, pressure that will come from the people. There’s no other way. So we are mobilising people around the referendum now, as well as seeking support from the international community.

The referendum plan involves five steps. The first is the announcement itself. This was followed by state pressure, including arrests – but we are still alive. The second is spreading and deepening the concept. The referendum idea has been widely discussed among shortwave radio listeners, on the net, and on satellite TV, as well as in over 200 media articles.

There have also been numerous meetings on the referendum idea in Iran’s universities all around the country. When Islamist clerics and their supporters say that it is radical to talk about changing the

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constitution, students challenge them on matters of constitutional law. Students argue that free elections in Iran require getting rid of the Council of Guardians; and to get rid of the Council of Guardians requires changing the constitution.

Everybody – university students, families, taxi-drivers – is talking about the referendum. This leads to the third step, organisation, the coordination of all this support behind the key aims of the plan. If this succeeds, the fourth step is civil resistance. There are plenty of pro-referendum people in Iran. At their heart are university students, the most important element of the population. In the universities, we can organise civil resistance actions around the referendum: demanding freedom for political prisoners, freedom of speech, the reopening of newspapers.

In this regard, we are studying the experiences of other countries. The “velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia and the *satyagraha* movement in India are only two examples. Iranians are quite different from Czechs and Indians, however. It’s difficult, maybe impossible, to persuade Iranians to sit down and be beaten and attacked without resisting. We are not Hindus. But we can invite people to light candles in their windows, and many other things.

We need non-violent action – not revolution. In the revolutionary period, I was glad to see hatred of the Shah’s regime, because it created and fuelled a revolution. But our project now is democracy. This means total openness to all points of view. When we announced that we wanted to hold a referendum on our constitution, we said that all groups were welcome to join us. Democracy requires this. Why exclude anyone?

Among our supporters are monarchists, even the son of the Shah. The monarchists say that they believe in parliamentary democracy, and that any Shah would only be the symbol of the country.

Some argue that the referendum movement should propose a candidate in the presidential elections of June 2005 on a platform of changing the constitution. The candidate would use the campaign solely as a vehicle to press the case for a referendum – a kind of “demonstration candidacy”. I’m not sure this is the best way.

The referendum movement for freedom and democracy in Iran needs international support – moral, intellectual, and organisational. We do not need financial support. We would never compromise ourselves by accepting money from a foreign

government; if you do that, you are doing their work rather than yours.

Another source of foreign support might be from intellectuals, writers, artists, poets, playwrights, singers, novelists, philosophers. If they backed the referendum movement, it would help Iranian people gain the self-confidence they need.

This psychological dimension is crucial. Iranians believe that for any movement to be successful it must have the support of the international community. This is the first time in our recent history that Iranians have thought this way. The reason is that the regime is autocratic: it concentrates all power in its hands. It can harass everybody, close down shops, shut newspapers, block websites. Many Iranians feel opposition is useless in the face of this. So they want international help.

But this help should not be military. Some Iranians call American forces the “soldiers of democracy”. It is widely believed in Iran that Britain supports the mullahs and the United States wants Iran free. I tell students in many universities that I don’t agree. We need democracy, but not by means of an invasion. We must grow it ourselves, through civil society, participation in social and political affairs – not through military force.

The main focus of discussions about Iran, its future and its relations with the west is the nuclear question. I think that this is a diversion. What matters is the nature of the country’s government. Whether or not there is a nuclear programme and what danger it poses is altered by the stability and character of the governing circles. If Iran becomes a society with a democratic government operating within a constitutional settlement that is based on human rights principles, then this changes the relevance of any nuclear capabilities it may have or develop.

The demand that Iran’s government is open and transparent about its weapons programme is much less important than whether Iran can have an open and transparent political and constitutional system that the Iranian people themselves can trust. This is where trust starts: it can’t be imposed from outside. Indeed, the danger of this diversion is that it will harden the regime and even strengthen support for it, the very opposite of what should be happening.

[The minimal theory of Islam](#)

The support of western intellectuals would be especially important to our young generation. So far, leftist thinkers and writers have paid little attention to

Iran. In any case, anti-Americanism, anti-westernism, anti-imperialism doesn't speak to our struggle. Young Iranians are reading the work of Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt. These thinkers are all available in Persian.

My generation thought about revolution and nothing more. But now Iranians are thinking about liberalism: Kant and neo-Kantianism. A new generation of Iranian scholars has studied the philosophy of science and religion. As a result, new ideas are emerging about a theme that figures centrally in Iran's national conversation: the conflict between tradition (not just our religion, Islam, but our poetry and literature, our rituals and culture) and modernity.

The place of Islam itself in our public life is central to the task of bridging this conflict. The strongest motivation for me is Islam itself. But precisely because I am a deeply religious person, I am also a secularist who believes in the separation of state and mosque.

In Iran we need a *minimal* theory of religion, not the *maximum* theory the Islamic Republic employs. A minimal theory of Islam or religion is the opposite of Islamism. When President Khatami started to argue for a religious democracy, he showed that he understands neither civil society nor democracy. Democracy is democracy.

This regime has done so many bad things to our country in the name of religion. As a result, young

people in Iran are turning away from religion. If that's Islam, they say, we don't want it. So the divorce between Islam and the state is not only for the sake of human rights and democracy, but for Islam itself. We want to restore religion to its essence, our belief in God, something beautiful in our heart – but not in the state or the law.

The result would be that religion is returned to people. Each person can have his or her own religion, and respect the rights of others to have theirs. The minimal theory of Islam says that Islam should be about living one's life, not running society or ruling the state. That is not the task of Islam. The main task of Islam is to invite people into God and into his light. This does not require a politics of Islam, an economics of Islam, a social affairs of Islam – the maximum theory of Islam, or Islamism. You don't need the state to impose religion.

The new paradigm that revolves around liberalism, democracy, pluralism, and human rights is completed by secularism. Its embodiment in a new constitution will be the work of Iranians ourselves. But to ease its birth, we want and need the support of international civil society. We are in a global era where borders are being transcended. We need global support.

Mohsen Sazegara was a leader in the Iranian student movement against the Shah and held several government posts after the 1979 revolution. After resigning in 1989, he became a newspaper publisher and wrote a doctoral thesis on religious intellectuals and the Islamic revolution. After his presidential candidacy was refused in 2001, he initiated a campaign for a referendum on a new Iranian constitution. In March 2005, he joined the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on a two-month fellowship.

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