Next Generation

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Articles & Testimony

Last week, Iranians elected a proto-fascist as president. The rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, formerly the mayor of Tehran, was a blow to the vibrant reform movement that swept Mohammed Khatami to the presidency in 1997. Ahmadinejad's extreme social conservatism—which bears plenty of resemblance to the Taliban's—and his economic populism have thus far dominated the Western media's coverage of the results, and understandably so.

But while Ahmadinejad will likely govern as a social conservative and economic populist, it wasn't his policy proposals alone that propelled him to victory. Rather, his win is best understood as a function of generational politics. Ahmadinejad's base of support came from the millions of Iranians for whom fighting in the Iran-Iraq war was the defining event of their lives. This generation is distinct from the revolutionary generation that brought the mullahs to power in 1979. And, unfortunately, it may turn out to be even more dangerous.

These veterans are convinced that they saved Iran and bitterly resent the condescending attitude that they are country bumpkins and barely literate hicks who are caught in a time warp. That attitude is held by the youth and intellectuals, of course; but it is also prevalent among the revolutionary generation that has, until now, held power—and includes unprincipled, corrupt ex-revolutionaries like Ali Akbar Rafsanjani and the hardliners around Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, many of whom are educated and sophisticated.

We in the West might assume that the war generation would be scarred by the fact that 300,000 of its ranks died in the war, or perhaps bitter at the revolutionary leaders who sent them to invade Iraq in July 1982 in what proved to be a futile six-year campaign. But time has softened the bad memories; what remains is nostalgia for the solidarity and moral clarity of the days when the revolution was young. Which is why the war generation's preferred solution to any political problem is to issue clear, simple orders—the same approach that sent thousands of young boys to clear mine fields armed only with keys to heaven. As Tehran's mayor, Ahmadinejad's solution to the city's traffic problem has not been to take the logical step of raising the price of gasoline from 30 cents per gallon (a price that makes Tehran's streets the world's largest parking lot and its air a health hazard). Instead, he has promoted a scheme under which drivers with odd-numbered license plates could drive only on odd days of the month, while drivers with even-numbered license plates could drive only on even days. Meanwhile, his proposed solution to inflation is to order state companies to freeze or lower prices, requiring the government to spend half its oil revenue on subsidies. These populist solutions appeal to many lower-class Iranians, especially because it is clear to all that Ahmadinejad is honest and straightforward—unlike the old revolutionaries who ooze sleaze.

But while the war generation's approach to domestic politics will be a tragedy for Iranians, it is the generation's foreign policy that will isolate Iran even more. The war generation is ignorant of the outside world: The veterans did not travel or study abroad and they came of age at a time when access to Western media and culture was blocked. Perhaps as a result, the veterans don't trust the world community, which sat on its hands when Iraq invade Iran in September 1980 and again when Saddam used chemical weapons. So Ahmadinejad has complained that foreign investors are out to rob the country; he has demanded the "renationalization" of the oil industry; and his supporters have opposed every major foreign investment in Iran, from Renault's billion-dollar automobile plans to Turkish

investments in cell phones and the Tehran airport. This mindset places high priority on nuclear weapons: Because Iran can expect only hostility from the outside world, the country's survival depends on its ability to produce weapons, and the disapproval of the world community means little.

With Ahmadinejad's election, the rise of the war generation came earlier than expected. Like most analysts, I thought the revolutionary generation could manage one last gasp, with Rafsanjani attracting support from both hardliners and reformers. But the revolutionary generation has alienated too many people. The reformers within its ranks have become detested: Not only did they lack the intestinal fortitude to defend the brave students, journalists, and intellectuals who were demanding the freedoms the reformers claimed to want, but they joined the hardliners in corruption while doing nothing to improve the economy. As a result, millions sat out the election.

There is one silver lining to the war generation's rise: It should lead to greater clarity about the true nature of the Islamic Republic—which is neither true to Islam nor a true republic—among Western politicians and pundits. The illusion that Iran is a semi-democratic country to which change is slowly coming has already been shed by millions of Iranians. Now it should be shed by those in the West who long searched for moderates in power with whom to engage. The Washington Post has pointed out that "the elimination of political liberals from Iranian government should make it easier for Western governments to explicitly side with Iran's demoralized but still substantial pro-democracy movement." One can only hope.

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