Empty Gesture

Jun 17, 2005

Articles & Testimony

Today, when Iranians go to the polls to elect a new president, the vote will almost certainly be free, competitive, and fair. It will also be a joke. Always inventive, Iran's ruling mullahs years ago developed a new twist on the old autocratic game of holding sham elections. Whereas the conventional sham election consists of a rigged race for an important political post—as when Saddam Hussein claimed victory in Iraq's 2003 presidential election with 99 percent of the vote—today's Iranian vote is the opposite: a real race for a meaningless post. And weirdly enough, that could turn out to be a good thing for the future of democracy in Iran.

Across the Middle East, old style sham elections that generated ludicrously overwhelming victories for the incumbent have become passé; the new style is to create the appearance of a more open system. For instance, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is allowing carefully selected opposition candidates to challenge his bid for a seventh term. His previous victories, by contrast, came in mere yes-or-no referenda on whether to approve his reelection.

Iran, which started offering seemingly fair but actually irrelevant elections years ago, continues to put on a misleading show. In the run up to today's vote, candidates have pandered (former Parliament Speaker Mehdi Karrubi pledged that the government would give each Iranian $65 per month) and posed in heroic photos (ex-Police Chief Mohammad Qalibaf, a sometime pilot, has run ads showing him flying an Airbus). Each contender has tried to look more modern than the next. Not satisfied with the same slick website that every candidate has assembled, presumed front runner and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had young women on roller blades swerving among cars handing out bumper stickers saying in English, "Hashemi4Future."

Slick? Yes. Democratic? Not exactly. Real power in Iran remains in the hands of those who control revolutionary institutions, especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Guardian Council he handpicks. The Guardian Council only approved the presidential candidacies of 8 out of 1,014 applicants. All those chosen are committed to modernizing within the framework of a system that keeps power out of the hands of the people.

The hardliners are unwilling to risk a repeat of the 1997 elections, in which Iranians had the poor taste to elect as president an underdog candidate whose landslide victory unleashed a wave of popular demands for a more open society. True, as president, the erstwhile progressive Mohammad Khatami has largely dithered, doing little to move reform forward while insisting on loyalty to the ideology and institutions of the Islamic Republic. But Khatami's very presence as president was a reminder that the people wanted reform; plus he refused to crack down on the young, the intellectuals, and the women who were demanding more freedom. So the hardliners responded by whittling away the president's powers. Iran's constitution provides for a weak president very much subordinate to the Supreme Leader who appoints judges, commands the military, directs radio and television, and can overrule any decision of the parliament or president. Which meant there was little Khatami could do when Khamenei gave his blessing to the hardliners in the security forces and the judiciary to set up parallel institutions completely outside the formal government structure.

Time after time, the government has found itself overruled by revolutionary leaders. The Information Ministry

licensed free newspapers only to see them shut down and their staff arrested by judicial police over whom the executive branch had no control. The Foreign Minister was not even invited to key meetings with European officials about the nuclear program, which were conducted by the National Security Council under Khamenei. The Transport Ministry built a new Tehran airport only to have the Revolutionary Guards refuse to allow it to open.

But by taking this approach, the Iranian regime is taking a real risk. In doing such a good job of creating the illusion of democracy, the regime raised expectations among its citizens that their votes would count for something—that change was possible from within the system. As it has become clear that the elections are a sham, Iranians have grown alienated from the process. From his jail cell, the courageous writer Akbar Ganji has issued a manifesto calling for an election boycott: "The path that the reformers have picked for reform will not lead to democracy. ... The despotic system will be weakened and undermined if there is no continuous cooperation with it." Voices across the political spectrum, from intellectuals to monarchists to communists, are calling for a referendum to change the constitution. Turnout is expected to be low.

It's not just Iranians who are less and less likely to be fooled by this democratic charade. Even among European leaders—who have spent years refusing to press Iran for fear of undermining Khatami—there is little enthusiasm for the self-proclaimed pragmatists or reformers. Officials from the E3—Britain, France, and Germany—have rejected the argument that they should shore up the victor against his hardline opponents by cutting him some slack in nuclear negotiations. In fact, the Iranians have so alienated the E3 with repeated lies about their nuclear program that Europeans are taking an unusually hard line. In April Iran threatened to undercut an agreement with the E3 by converting some uranium into uranium hexaflouride gas, which is fed into centrifuges for enrichment. The European response was to stand firm, sounding out Security Council members about condemning Iran if it went ahead with those plans. In preparing for the end-of-July resumption of negotiations, the Europeans are not talking about how much to concede to Iran; they are instead shoring up international support for the position that Iran must suspend enrichment and conversion indefinitely. And they are having some unexpected success: To Tehran's shock, Russia is taking a tougher and tougher stance on Iran's nuclear program.

What will happen in the next few years is entirely unclear. Many Iran experts put forward convincing arguments as to why the regime's control is rock solid: a core of true believers are ready to kill for the revolution; the regime has a powerful ideology; and most Iranians are tuned out of politics. All true. But, then again, how many Russia experts foresaw the fall of the Soviet Union? What's more, Iranians have a long history of popular uprisings for democracy. When Americans think of Iran's past what may come to mind is the absolute rule of the Shah in the 1970s; but Iran had a bloody Constitutional Revolution from 1906 to 1911 in which merchants and mullahs demanded that the Shah agree to share power. (He conceded but then wore down the reformers.) In fact, the 1979 Islamic Revolution was a true people's movement aimed at overthrowing autocracy—before it was hijacked by hardline mullahs determined to silence their opponents.

By failing to provide even a limited outlet for their citizens' democratic aspirations, Iran's mullahs have created the risk that an outcry for complete democracy will grow. "[P]residential campaigns unfolding across Iran's capital," The Washington Post has reported, "betray not the slightest suggestion that this is a theocratic state." That, of course, is exactly the point. Fortunately, most Iranians are no longer fooled by their government's electoral sham. We shouldn't be either.

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