

Iran between Elections and the IAEA

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Brief Analysis

To no one's surprise, the Iranian parliamentary elections resulted in a conservative sweep; the hardliners had rigged the rules so as to prevent a serious contest. As the hardliners consolidate their control, they may be interested in improving relations with the United States, though a major initiative would likely appear only after they retake the presidency at the end of Muhammad Khatami's term in May 2005. The most obvious bait for such engagement is Iran's nuclear program. On February 22, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general Mohamed ElBaradei met with Iranian Supreme National Security Council head Hassan Rohani to discuss the IAEA report due out this week, which shows once again that Iran has made clandestine progress toward nuclear enrichment, further raising the stakes. Given the risks, would a U.S.-Iranian deal be appropriate?

How Significant Were the Reformers?

The Iranian parliamentary elections were profoundly depressing. The elected reformers would not even put up a fight to preserve their power, while the Iranian people were too disgusted with them to show much interest in their plight. After Khatami's election in 1997 and the reformers' landslide victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections, many assumed that Iran was on an irreversible path toward reform; the only question was, at what pace. That view -- which this writer certainly shared -- has proven to be wrong. Instead, Iran's revolutionary institutions have steadily gained power while the formal government has lost both power and credibility. The reformers, whose only power is within the formal government, are fading. Iranian politics is increasingly characterized by an "unelected few [who] repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom," as President George W. Bush put it in his much-criticized 2002 State of the Union speech. Those who thought that the West's main focus should be on reinforcing Khatami and the elected reformers hoped in vain; when push came to shove, the reformers would not confront the hardliners.

As the hardliners consolidate their control, the Islamic Republic becomes not only less republican, but also less Islamic. That is, the hardliners are tightening their grip more out of a concern for their power than for ideological zeal. Indeed, the hardliners have been prepared to strike ideological compromises rather than allow their power to be threatened. The most important of these compromises has been with the Iranian people. Social restrictions -- especially on dress and entertainment -- have been loosened, taking much of the steam out of protests by youths and women. No mass demonstrations have been held during the past month, and calls for boycotting the ballot were largely ignored outside Tehran. The depressing conclusion is that Iran has come to resemble Syria: an anti-Western

nation run by thugs who will do the minimum necessary to deflect external pressure while retaining a tight grip on their people, even as the country slips slowly backward economically and socially.

Hardliners and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Although the West would prefer to deal with Iran's reformers, the formal government they control can do nothing of importance. Consider that the October 2003 nuclear agreement with the British, French, and German foreign ministers was signed by Rohani, a hardline official, who did not even allow Iran's foreign minister to be involved in the decision. Besides laying bare the structure of power in Islamic Iran, this episode showed the hardliners' pragmatism in putting power ahead of ideology.

The quandary for the West lies in the fact that the cruel dictators running Iran may offer an attractive geopolitical concession over their nuclear program, but only in return for the West agreeing to work with them, which in practice means abandoning the cause of democratic reform. This is the grand bargain that the United States has made with regional dictators for years: (minimal) Middle Eastern cooperation on geostrategic issues in return for U.S. silence on domestic reform. By allowing Middle Eastern rulers to crack down on the opposition, however, that bargain fueled the forces of radicalism, channeling them into the anti-Americanism that resulted in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Consequently, the "pragmatic" approach of making geostrategic deals with dictators was shown to be a failure.

If U.S. officials were previously tempted to go down that route with Iran, that country's February 22 acknowledgement that it had a second, more advanced uranium enrichment program has ended such a prospect. Iran's admission to the IAEA that it had built advanced centrifuges on a military base would have been troubling under any conditions. But the real significance of this development is that Iran acknowledged its actions only when confronted with solid evidence collected from other sources, including the Libyan and Pakistani descriptions of their nuclear programs. In other words, despite the high-profile international agreement between Iran's top leaders and three European foreign ministers, and despite Tehran's promises to be fully forthcoming with the IAEA regarding its nuclear program, Iran continued to hide aspects of its nuclear program that had not yet been detected by international inspectors. The obvious concern is that Iran is hiding other nuclear activities, continuing its eighteen-year pattern of concealment of information that it is obligated to report to the IAEA. Such concealment would be consistent with how Tehran approaches other international obligations (e.g., counterterrorism): the regime reveals only what outsiders already know and then offers to come back into compliance with its international obligations only if rewarded. There is little point in making a deal with a regime that breaks deals regularly and uses this deal-breaking as a bargaining chip to extract further concessions.

What Next?

The U.S. priority for 2004 is Iraq. There, the United States is having problems dealing with what is still, in effect, a war. Iran can cause serious problems in that arena if it so desired. Until Iraq is stabilized, the United States is not in a good position to make a major push on Iran. Washington should urge those convening the IAEA meeting in early March to report to the UN Security Council Iran's failures to comply with its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; after all, the IAEA should by all rights keep the Security Council informed about problems of such grave importance. On the whole, though, Washington would prefer to find ways to delay dealing with the Iranian problem until a more opportune time.

In order to make time work to the U.S. advantage on the nonproliferation front, three key actions are required. First, Washington must broaden and deepen the international consensus against Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. It would be useful if the Iranian hardliners were firmly convinced that Iran would face military reaction (possibly preemption, but certainly a sharply increased military presence at their borders) if they continue to develop such weapons. Second, Russia should be induced not to send fuel for use in Iran's Bushehr reactor anytime soon. The provision of

this fuel would greatly complicate the effort to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. In light of the recent problems with intelligence detection of clandestine activities, it would seem appropriate to reconsider whether a country that has acknowledged an eighteen-year record of lying to the IAEA should be allowed to proceed with a facility such as Bushehr, which is large enough to facilitate the concealment of clandestine activities. Third, Washington must reassure other regional states (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Turkey) who may decide to rethink their nuclear posture if Iran is in fact moving toward a situation of nuclear ambiguity.

In order to make time work to the U.S. advantage on the democracy promotion front, no U.S. action would be as important as creating a stable, democratic Iraq. Such a development would be a powerful example to the tens of thousands of Iranians now traveling to Iraq to visit the Shi'i holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Moreover, if those cities once again become the center of Shi'a learning, the religious legitimacy of Iran's hardliners would be seriously undermined, given that the vast majority of clerics in those cities reject Iranian-style direct clerical rule.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute.

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