

The United States and the Iranian Election

The election of the hard-line Teheran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over former president Hashemi Rafsanjani as the new president of Iran is undeniably a setback to those hoping to advance the cause of greater social and political freedom in that country.

It should not necessarily be seen as a turn to the right by the Iranian electorate, however. While Rafsanjani was portrayed as a more moderate conservative, the fact that this 70-year old cleric had become a millionaire while in government service and was widely seen as the penultimate wheeler dealer of the political establishment was apparently perceived by many Iranians as of greater importance than his modest reform agenda. By contrast, the victorious campaign of the young Teheran mayor focused upon the plight of the poor and cleaning up corruption.

In a political system where the real power has become concentrated in the hands of unelected military, economic and right-wing ideological interests, Iranian voters were forced to choose between two flawed candidates where the relatively liberal contender came across as an out-of-touch elitist and his ultra-conservative opponent was able to put together a majority coalition of less-educated and fundamentalist voters based upon a pseudo-populist campaign promoting a more moral and value-centered society. In short, it was a situation that should not be too unfamiliar to American voters.

Another significant factor which led to Ahmadinejad's election was the fact that the United States did not provide Iranians with much incentive to elect another reformist as head of state. During the administration of the outgoing two-term reformist president Mohammed Khatami, who was first elected in 1997, the United States actually strengthened its economic sanctions against Iran and began to openly threaten military attack. While most Iranians would like improved relations with the United States, they apparently got the message that U.S. hostility toward their country would continue regardless of whether they chose a reformist or a hard-liner as president.

Despite efforts by the Bush administration and its supporters to use the flawed election process in Iran to further isolate that country and discredit its government, and despite a call by some U.S.-based exiles for a boycott, more than two-thirds of eligible voters went to the polls during the first round, a higher percentage than in recent American presidential elections.

Many, though not all, reform-minded candidates were prevented from running and – as the failure of Khatami to significantly liberalize the system illustrated – unelected ultra-conservative clerics are still capable of dominating the political system, particularly when they can take advantage of fears brought on by American troops occupying their two immediate neighbors and threatening to attack them as well. Despite these very real limitations, however, the election campaign has been utilized by the growing pro-democracy movement to encourage greater political discourse and deepen popular involvement in the political process.

For the first time since becoming a republic a quarter century ago, Iran's presidential election was forced into a second round. While the disappointment with the choices offered led to a much lower turnout during the runoff, the fact that the majority of Iranians chose to take part in the electoral process appears to indicate that most Iranians believed they had at least some stake in the outcome. Still, President Bush insisted that the Iranian vote failed to meet "the basic requirements of democracy" and that the "oppressive record" of the country's rulers made the election illegitimate. Such comments appeared to have actually catalyzed a number of Iranian voters

from across the political spectrum to participate in the election, who noted that it was the United States which engineered the overthrow of the country's last genuinely democratic government in 1953 and backed the repressive regime of the unelected Shah until his ouster in a popular revolution in 1979. Efforts by the Bush administration to portray the political situation in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan as better alternatives to that of Iran similarly failed to inspire Iranian voters. While those countries recently experienced a relatively fair electoral process, both are suffering from economic collapse, a lack of basic services, bloody insurgency campaigns led by Islamic extremists and even bloodier counter-insurgency campaigns by the United States. Furthermore, neither the Iraqi nor Afghan governments actually exercise real control over most of their respective country, nor has either of these elected governments thus far demonstrated any real independence from U.S. military and economic domination.

A look at most other U.S. allies in the region does not offer much inspiration for those desiring greater freedom and democracy, either. There are no competitive elections for president, for prime minister, nor for any kind of legislative body that can initiate and pass meaningful laws or make real policy in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, or other autocratic governments in that region supported with American military and economic aid. Indeed, the majority of governments supported by the United States in the Middle East and Central Asia are even less democratic than Iran.

At least the Iranian government does not massacre demonstrators by the hundreds or boil dissidents to death, as does the U.S.-backed Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. Nor do they usurp most of the nation's riches on themselves and their relatives and keep political control within a single extended family, like the U.S.-backed family dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and the other sheikdoms of the Arabian Peninsula. And, unlike during the recent election day in Egypt under the ruling U.S.-backed Mubarak dictatorship, police in Iran did not escort pro-government thugs to brutally attack a group of women daring to hold a nonviolent protest in support of greater political freedom.

Yet it is Iran, not these U.S.-backed dictatorships, where President Bush complains that "Power is in the hands of an unelected few." It is Iran where Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice challenged the legitimacy of the presidential election because female candidates had been barred from running, while praising the far more restrictive elections in Saudi Arabia for some local councils in which women, unlike in Iran, were not even allowed to vote.

Such American double-standards, of course, can in no way excuse the repression, the lack of adequate choices in the election process, and the many other very real failures by the Iranian regime to conform to international standards of human rights and representative government.

It does, however, indicate that the emphasis given by the Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties on the lack of greater democracy and human rights in Iran stems not from concern for democracy and human rights as a principle, but as an excuse to punish, isolate and militarily threaten an oil-rich country which refuses to sufficiently cooperate with American economic and strategic designs in the Middle East.

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