

**THE QUEST FOR IRAN'S DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT.**  
**Testimony for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.**  
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Iranians will vote for a new president on 17 June, and some 1,100 prospective candidates registered from 10-14 May. This will be the ninth presidential election since the Islamic revolution of 1979, and Iran's rulers cite the number of elections as evidence of their theocracy's democratic nature. But these elections are democratic in name only. Presidential candidates' qualifications must be approved by a cleric dominated body called the Guardians Council. The Council's six clerics are selected by the country's top official, another unelected cleric known as the Supreme Leader. The six lawyers on the Council are selected by the head of the country's judiciary, another cleric appointed by the Supreme Leader.

Iranians want a voice in running their own affairs, they want to determine their own fates, and they want relief from the oppressive theocracy that runs their country. They tried to achieve these goals by electing a charismatic dark horse with a relatively liberal reputation as president in 1997 and re-electing him four years later. They also voted-in a parliamentary majority of reformists in 2000. However, Iran's political system, in which unelected institutions have the power to overrule the elected officials of the executive and legislative branches, made it difficult to accomplish anything substantive. Moreover, a timid President Mohammad Khatami failed to use his popular mandate to push through the measures that could have democratized the system.

Iranians' political expression is not restricted to the electoral process. They frequently demonstrate against injustice and incompetence on the part of state officials. They expressed themselves in the press, and when that venue was severely restricted by the authorities, they turned to the Internet. In a recent development, they are using the Internet to push for a referendum on the country's constitution.

These developments may lead observers to expect regime change in Iran. However, most of the factors necessary for a revolution's success are absent in Iran. Most importantly, there is no unified democratic movement that is ready to act against the regime and which has plans for its replacement. For example, students, who were among the most vociferous political actors in Iran during the last decade, are members of several groups with divergent views towards the regime. Nor have any serious leaders emerged -- imprisonment and torture has been used against a brave few in Iran, and the effectiveness of those in exile is questionable. Finally, there is no agreement on foreign involvement in opposition activities -- organizers of an online referendum welcome this, but student leaders and mainstream reformist figures oppose it.

Nevertheless, there are measures that could assist and accelerate the democratic process in Iran. These include logistical assistance to non-governmental organizations, the creation of independent labor organizations, and identification of and training for potential pro-democracy leaders. Furthermore, the international community should

continue to condemn the Iranian legal system, which closes news publications on the flimsiest of excuses and which does not grant equal rights to women or to ethnic and religious minorities.

### **STIFFLING DISSENT.**

Iranians' dissatisfaction with the regime is never far from the surface. Townspeople and villagers demonstrate against inadequate provision of social services, workers protest over lay-offs and factory closures, and students object to poor facilities. After 25 years in power, the regime has become quite skilled in dealing with such events. In some cases it just lets the unrest burn itself out by allowing the demonstrators to gather, shout some angry slogans, and maybe burn some buses or break some windows. But the security forces contain the situation, and calm is restored after people have let off steam.

The unhappiness of some Iranians is not confined to personal and immediate issues, however. They are also disturbed by the limits on personal and political freedom. In the face of serious press restrictions, some express their political views via the Internet, particularly through web logs (blogs).

The regime has taken a resolute approach to the Internet dissidents, combining disinformation and repression. In September 2004 an editorial in *Kayhan*, a high-circulation daily affiliated with the supreme leader's office, accused Iranian journalists living in and out of the country of participating in a U.S. controlled and directed network. This network allegedly shaped and manipulated information originating in Iran, and then relayed it as news to Europe and then back to Iran.

Around that time -- autumn 2004 -- a number of the online journalists and bloggers were arrested. According to Reporters Without Borders and the bloggers' interviews with a presidential commission in early 2005, they were kept in solitary confinement and tortured. They were released after newspapers published their open letters, in which the online journalists said they'd seen the error of their ways and expressed gratitude for the kindness they received while in detention. The online journalists acknowledged participating in a network that involved "foreigners and counterrevolutionaries" who were cooperating with reformist politicians in Iran and "fugitives" who left the country. The letters of contrition referred to illegal websites, and their authors admitted giving interviews to foreign radio stations.

If the regime cannot get to somebody it will go after his family. In the case of Netherlands-based online journalist Sina Motallebi, the authorities arrested his father, Said Motallebi, and released him only after forbidding him from having any contact with international organizations or the press.

These measures have been quite effective and appear to have forced some of the Internet activists to withdraw from politics. "I am quitting political work for good in Iran," activist Hanif Mazrui said in the *New York Times* on 26 December 2004. A former detainee who requested anonymity told the newspaper that he and some of his colleagues intend to leave the country. On 10 May 2005, the *Aftab-e Yazd* daily newspaper reported that 17

bloggers were acquitted, but the father of one blogger complained in the 14 May issue of the daily that his son is still in jail and the authorities have not acted on his case yet.

### **ONLINE REFERENDUM.**

The Internet has proven to be an important new vehicle for public expression. Persian is reportedly the third-most popular language on the web, after English and Chinese. For many young Iranians, the web logs (blogs) are a means by which boys and girls can communicate and discuss topics no more significant than movies and hip-hop music.

Internet use took a more political turn in Autumn 2004, when a group of Iranian dissidents and students called for a referendum on the country's form of government. Their website (<http://www.60000000.com>) encourages people to sign a petition calling for "a national referendum with the free participation of the Iranian people, under the supervision of appropriate international institutions and observers, for the drafting of a new constitution that is compatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all its associated covenants." The Committee to Organize a Referendum includes prominent figures such as Harvard University professor and human rights lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, national religious activist and former Tehran University president Mohammad Maleki, and journalist Mohsen Sazegara, who is currently in Washington. Moreover, the involvement of Iranian expatriates and the international community is being encouraged.

Theoretically, the call for a referendum is not so far-fetched. Article 59 of the current Iranian constitution says there can be recourse to public opinion on important economic, political, social, and cultural issues by holding a referendum if two-thirds of the legislature approves of this, and Article 177 says the constitution can be revised by a referendum if the conditions of Article 59 are met.

Realistically, it is very unlikely that the current legislature would permit a referendum to take place. The majority of sitting parliamentarians are conservatives, and the younger and more activist ones tend to dominate political discourse. They owe their posts to the constitution and the electoral interference of powerful unelected bodies. They will not seek to undo the arrangement which brought them to power.

Moreover, the call for a referendum has generated opposition from mainstream reformist politicians in Iran. Their preference is for operating within the current constitutional framework, and they also argue that the call for a referendum leaves a number of important questions unanswered. For example, what is the relationship between mosque and state, and what about rights for religious and ethnic minorities? An organizer of the referendum told the author in early-May 2005 that the reformists' opposition stems from their fear of losing access to power.

The referendum's objective is 60,000,000 signatures. As of mid-May it has approximately 36,000. The dispute over the referendum and its lack of realism is one reason for the low interest in it. Another reason could be that the regime has blocked access to the web site. Possibly reflecting frustration over the lack of progress, an organizer of the referendum,

Ghassem Sholeh Sadi, said two approaches to the June presidential election are being considered, the *New York Sun* reported on 31 March 2005. The original plan was a boycott, he said, but with fresh inspiration from events in Kyrgyzstan the election could be turned into an uprising. He did not explain further.

### **DISUNITED STUDENTS.**

Observers inspired by the role of youth movements such as Serbia's Otpor, Georgia's Kmara, and Ukraine's Pora in those country's revolutions may have similar expectations from their Iranian counterparts. Indeed, some two-thirds of the Iranian population is under the age of 30 (46 million out of a total population of 69 million), there are approximately 1.2 million university students, and the voting age is 15.

Iranian students have a long history of political activism, and student demonstrations in Tehran and Tabriz in July 1999 rocked the country and alarmed the regime. Students in major cities protested in November 2002 after a provincial court sentenced political activist and university lecturer Hashem Aghajari to death for blasphemy. There were more demonstrations in June 2003, as university students reacted to rumors that they would have to pay tuition. The audience at Student Day speeches every December has gotten increasingly unruly, and in 2004 President Mohammad Khatami was heckled the entire time.

There are many reasons to be skeptical about the student's revolutionary potential. Many university places are reserved for children of war veterans and state officials, and they are unlikely to oppose the regime outright. For others, economic and professional issues take precedence over politics. Those who must get a university place on their own merits face a vigorous and demanding examination process. Hoping that a college degree will help in the quest for a job when there is double-digit unemployment, they are unlikely to risk expulsion. In fact, the Iranian media and the country's officials occasionally bemoan the continuing "brain drain," as educated young people seek employment overseas.

Those students who are politically active are not very united. The best-known student organization, the Office for Fostering Unity (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*), split in two in early-2002 because of a dispute regarding support for President Khatami and the reformists. This situation persisted until May 2004, when members of the two wings reportedly decided to reunite and elected a new leadership consisting of older figures.

Nevertheless, the Iranian media continues to describe the existence of two separate factions. Indeed, members of the majority wing organized a sit-in at Amir Kabir University in early May to protest the holding of political prisoners and actions against student activists.

There is a more radical student organization known as the "Tabarzadi Group" (named for its founder, the oft-imprisoned Heshmatollah Tabarzadi). Furthermore, the regime created the University Jihad and the Student Basij in the early 1980s to monitor on-campus political tendencies. 1998 legislation created a Basij unit in every university.

The regime's formal and informal repressive apparatus also limits the students' potential. The July 1999 unrest, which was triggered by the attack of uniformed police and plainclothes vigilantes on a Tehran University dormitory, came to an end after massive arrests and a threat by Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commanders to President Khatami that if he did not calm the situation they would take matters into their own hands. The June 2003 demonstrations ended only after vigilantes intervened and police arrested some 4,000 people.

The national police force has taken a new tack since several low level officers were tried for their part in the 1999 unrest (this was a show-trial intended to assuage public anger). Rather than using brute force to suppress dissent, the police try to keep student protestors and vigilantes apart. Nevertheless, the vigilantes act with support from state institutions. Furthermore, unofficial parallel security institutions that do not answer to any elected branch of the government have emerged. The threat of violence, therefore, is omnipresent.

"Unknown prisons" is a phenomenon reminiscent of Argentina's Dirty War in the 1970s. There are many detention facilities that are not under the purview of the Prisons, Security, and Correction Organization. The national police, police precincts, the Armed Forces Judicial Organization, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, the judiciary, and the Revolutionary Courts all run separate penal facilities that are free of oversight. Detainees sometimes disappear into this system and are not heard from for weeks.

The majority of the detainees are eventually released. But rather than dismissing the charges against them, the authorities merely suspend the charges. This means that the charges can be reinstated at any time and the individual can be arrested again. Moreover, individuals are arbitrarily summoned for questioning. These actions serve to intimidate individuals and discourage their activism. There are notable exceptions to this rule. A photograph of student Ahmad Batebi waving a bloody shirt was published by major international media in July 1999, and he was subsequently imprisoned for his role in the 1999 tumult and his comments and actions. He and some other students are still in jail. This serves as a powerful reminder to other young Iranians.

Economic prioritization, the lack of organizational unity, and the constant threat of violence and repression has discouraged many potential activists. Their activism of eight years ago has changed, with the Office for Fostering Unity reportedly urging people not to vote in the June 2005 presidential elections, in the hope that this will be interpreted as a vote against the system.

### **NO LEADERS.**

Politically active students and promoters of democracy in Iran face yet another problem - - the absence of leadership. Anybody who is considered a serious threat is imprisoned. Incarceration and the accompanying dangers of torture, death, or disappearance tend to discourage all but the most ardent activists. It is reasonable, therefore, to look to the Iranian diaspora for a possible leadership figure, but there are few candidates.

One side of the opposition spectrum is represented by the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO or MEK) which the U.S. State Department designated a "foreign terrorist organization" in 1997. Still identified as a terrorist organization, the MKO also is known as the National Liberation Army of Iran (the militant wing of the MKO), the People's Mujahedin of Iran, National Council of Resistance, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, and Muslim Iranian Student's Society (a front organization used to garner financial support). The EU designated the MKO's military wing as a terrorist organization in May 2002.

The MKO was created in the 1960s and its ideology combines Islam and Marxism. It was involved with anti-U.S. terrorism in the 1970s, and it initially supported the 1978-79 revolution. In June 1981, it staged an unsuccessful uprising against the Islamic regime; many members were imprisoned while others fled the country. The MKO transitioned from being a "mass movement" in 1981 to having "all the main attributes of a cult" by mid-1987, Professor Ervand Abrahamian writes in his 1989 book, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin*. The MKO refers to its head, Masud Rajavi, in religious terms, calling him the *rahbar* (leader) and *imam-i hal* (present imam).

From its Iraqi exile the MKO attacked the Iranian regime's leadership: a 1981 bombing killed President Mohammad-Ali Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad-Javad Bahonar, in 1992 it attacked 13 Iranian embassies, and it is behind other mortar attacks and assassination attempts in Iran. Former President Saddam Hussein granted the MKO refuge in Iraq, and it helped Saddam Hussein suppress the 1991 uprisings of Shia in southern Iraq and Kurds in the north, so it is not very popular in Iraq. The MKO fought Iranian forces in the Iran-Iraq War, and this has discredited the organization among the Iranian public.

In May 2003, after Operation Iraqi Freedom, the MKO agreed to turn over its weapons to U.S. forces, and over time most of them have been restricted to one location, Camp Ashraf. In July 2004, MKO members in Iraq were granted "protected status" under the Geneva Conventions. The Iranian government has repeatedly offered an amnesty to rank-and-file members if they return to Iran, but the amnesty does not extend to the organization's leadership. A reluctance to return is understandable: many MKO members who were imprisoned in the early 1980s were tortured into recanting, and for a few months in 1988-1989 thousands of MKO and leftist prisoners were executed. Iranian state media sporadically reports on groups of former MKO members who have returned, but it is not clear how they are treated.

Some U.S. commentators have recommended removing the MKO from the terrorist list and using it as an armed resistance movement against Iran. There also are suggestions that MKO personnel should be cultivated as intelligence assets that might re-energize the reform movement in Iran. It is unlikely that MKO members would be trusted, since some reformists fought MKO personnel in the war, others created the security institutions that hunted them down, and most are part of the current political system. Furthermore, information provided by the MKO, which does not have the same objectives as the U.S.,

is likely to be self-serving and unreliable. Using MKO personnel as a partisan force is appealing, but association with them will discredit the U.S. in Iranians' eyes.

The MKO is just one end of the spectrum. There are other expatriate leaders who have less of a formal organization. For example, Reza Pahlavi, son of the last Iranian monarch, appears with some frequency on satellite television programs broadcast from the U.S. In October 2001 the authorities arrested over one thousand people for rioting after Iran lost a World Cup qualifying match in Bahrain. Chanting "Only Reza Pahlavi" and egged on by the television broadcasts, rioters attacked banks, ticket kiosks, public telephones, and traffic signs, as well as police and public vehicles.

It is impossible to quantify these leaders' impact (i.e., the number of followers). Furthermore, are those who chanted in favor of Reza Pahlavi in October 2001 truly monarchists, are they old enough to recall the monarchy, or were they just reacting to the TV broadcasts and letting off steam? Regardless, they are an annoyance to the regime, which arrested hundreds of people in 2001 and mentioned the possibility of reeducation.

Other exile promoters of regime change are secular communists, constitutionalists, nationalists, and pan-Iranists. There are organizations with inspiring names such as the Alliance for Democracy in Iran, Coalition for Democracy in Iran, and the International Committee for Transition to Democracy in Iran. This listing is not a comment about any group's objectives, nor does it reflect the size of its membership. This is not a comment on how representative the organizations are, either, because there is no way to independently confirm the extent of support within Iran.

### **RESPONDING WITH APATHY.**

In countries where the government depends on tax revenues to fund its activities, it is answerable to tax payers and their elected representatives. In Iran, the government depends mainly on oil revenues to operate, and it is the public that is dependent on the state. Commodities such as cooking oil, meat, rice, and bread are available at subsidized prices, and subsidized gasoline is among the cheapest in the world. The country's unemployment rate is estimated to be over 20 percent, and hiring quotas for veterans' families and a privileged few serve to exacerbate the situation. This dependence tends to discourage those who would oppose the regime.

Apathy appears to be the overwhelming Iranian response to the country's political climate, the limits on political expression, and the threat of repression. After participating in large numbers in the 1997 and 2001 presidential elections (88 percent and 63 percent turnout, respectively), 1999 municipal council elections (about 64 percent nationwide), and 2000 parliamentary elections (69 percent), fewer and fewer voters have turned out as reformers failed to deliver. The council election of 2003 saw a 50 percent nationwide turnout and in the major cities of Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad turnout was 12-20 percent. In the February 2004 parliamentary election, 51 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, and 6 percent of the ballots were spoiled or voided. Defacing ballots is a traditional Iranian way of showing dissent.

Some Iranian activists want to convert public apathy into political action by advocating a boycott of the 17 June presidential election. As candidates registered from 10-14 May, more than 500 Iranians signed a letter saying they will not vote because the polls are neither free nor do they serve the public, *Radio Farda* reported. An Interior Ministry official conceded that a possible boycott worries the regime. In fact this is a lose-lose situation. If Iranians do not vote, the victory of a conservative candidate is almost certain. The conservatives have easily mobilized constituencies, such as conscripts and state employees, so those who bother voting will back conservative candidates. If Iranians vote in large numbers, the regime will describe this as popular support and a sign of its legitimacy. In the unlikely chance that a pro-reform candidate is elected, his or her ability to implement meaningful changes is sharply curtailed.

### **THE VIEW FROM THE U.S.**

The United States wants to help the Iranian people. President George W. Bush has enunciated America's solidarity with the Iranian people several times. At his 3 February 2005 State of the Union address, for example, Bush said "And to the Iranian people, I say tonight: As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you." During his February 2005 tour of Europe, Bush again expressed his support for Iranians' aspirations. "We also look for Iran to finally deliver on promised reform," he said. "The time has arrived for the Iranian regime to listen to the Iranian people and respect their rights and join in the movement toward liberty that is taking place all around them."

Congress is similarly supportive. The recently introduced "Iran Freedom Support Act" states: "Congress declares that it should be the policy of the United States to support independent human rights and pro-democracy forces in Iran." (H.R. 282; 6 January 2005) and "Congress declares that it should be the policy of the United States (1) to support efforts by the people of Iran to exercise self-determination over the form of government of their country, and (2) to actively support a national referendum in Iran with oversight by international observers and monitors to certify the integrity and fairness of the referendum" (S. 333; 9 February 2005). The legislation authorizes the White House to assist the advocates of democracy in Iran, and it calls for increased contacts with "opposition groups in Iran."

These are praiseworthy objectives, and the President's statements remind Iranians that they are not forgotten and should not lose hope. However, as the discussion above shows, putting these plans into action would be very difficult. Nevertheless, there are several practical steps that can help the democratic process in Iran.

- Assistance should go to carefully selected non-governmental organizations in Iran. This could include the provision of laptop computers, satellite phones, cell phones, and even fax machines. The provision of cash is risky but may be unavoidable, and in the case of Serbia relatively small amounts of funding from the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute helped create Otpor offices and branches in Belgrade and other cities.

- There are no independent labor organizations in Iran. A state-licensed House of Labor purports to represent workers, but individuals from the House of Labor attacked the office of an independent labor syndicate and injured its leaders, *Eqbal* daily newspaper reported on 10 May. Furthermore, labor actions are usually connected with problems at individual workplaces, such as a factory where workers have not received their wages. Collective action is rare, and workers are not free to express themselves. The U.S. could play a part in organizing workers and creating independent unions.
- Prospective Iranian leaders should be identified and their travel to the U.S. or other overseas locations facilitated. Through no fault of our own, there is no U.S. embassy or consulate in Iran, and Iranians who want to visit the U.S. must go to Dubai or Istanbul to request a visa. The process is slow and potentially expensive for the applicant, and there is no guarantee of success. Washington should maintain a list of Iranians whose visa applications are pre-approved. Individuals on this list could be political figures, journalists, academics and intellectuals, and even promising young Iranian students. This would encourage them to visit the U.S. Even if travel to the U.S. is not feasible, these individuals could meet with democratic organizers in international locations. Once outside Iran they could learn more about the roles played by NGOs in other countries' transitions to democracy and receive organizational training. Expatriates who travel to Iran could organize workshops and conduct training.
- Pressure from other countries has an influence in Iran, especially if it is connected with sanctions. The international community must continue to criticize the politicized court system that closes newspapers and jails journalists. These events have become so commonplace in the last five years that they are rarely mentioned in the Western media. International bodies should call for the dismissal of the notorious press court judge Said Mortazavi, who is responsible for many of the press closures.
- Continuing international criticism must be directed towards Iran's legal system, where the value of one's testimony and the extent of one's rights are based on gender. Iranian women must have the same legal rights as Iranian men. International criticism of this situation will show Tehran that trying to justify this situation by attributing it to religious and cultural peculiarities is unacceptable. Similarly, ethnic and religious discrimination must face continuing and vocal condemnation.

Some observers believe Iranians should be left alone to sort out their own political evolution. This is an appealing thought, and if there was an infinite amount of time it would have a lot to recommend it. As Iran comes ever closer to becoming a nuclear power, because its regime sponsors international terrorism, and because the Iranian government continues to interfere in Iraqi affairs, waiting is not an option. A democratic Iran is far less likely to pursue such destructive policies.

In conclusion, there are steps the U.S. can take to hasten Iran's becoming a democracy. The belief that there is a pre-existing democratic movement or even an effective opposition group, however, is inaccurate. And although most Iranians undoubtedly favor independence and self-determination, assisting individuals rather than organizations without proper planning will be neither efficient nor effective.

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