

USADI Dispatch

A publication of the U.S. Alliance for Democratic Iran

Volume 1, No. 15

Thursday, February 12, 2004

USADI Commentary

After 25 years of Theocracy, Iranians Demand a Referendum for Regime Change

Twenty-five years have passed since the Iranian people toppled the shah's monarchic dictatorship in a popular revolution. The fundamentalists, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, succeeded in hijacking the 1979 revolution which had its roots in the 1953 Anglo-American coup d'etat that brought down the nationalist government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq. Decades of political suppression that followed eliminated a genuinely nationalist and democratic alternative to the shah's regime. The mullahs took advantage of the power vacuum and consolidated their reign.

Unable to channel the tremendous potential of a revolutionary environment in post-Shah Iran toward democracy and development, the theocracy Khomeini established began to attack and eliminate the secular and democratic currents in the name of God. Tens of thousands of political activists were executed or imprisoned and political groups, women, ethnic and religious minorities, were subjected to a harsh crackdown.

Externally, Tehran pursued a deadly and intransigent foreign policy of "exporting revolution," or as the world came to know, exporting fundamentalism and terrorism. The mullahs' regime called the Iran-Iraq war the "sacred defense," and vowed to "liberate Jerusalem via Karbala." Asymmetric warfare became the cornerstone of its military doctrine that relied on development of weapons of mass destruction.

A quarter century later, however, the mullahs' theocratic regime has grinded to a halt. The proponents of this brutal dictatorship feel quite embarrassed. The "knights of reform" riding on their wooden horses have been marginalized. Their *Don Quixote*, Khatami, capitulated to the most extreme faction of this theocracy and in effect fired the coup de grace to the deceptive campaign of "reform from within."

Frightened by the specter of internal schism in the face of growing popular dissent, the dominant faction has moved to get rid of the rival faction. But this is all too little, too late, rendering the regime evermore illegitimate and vulnerable.

Iran's secular democracy movement has endured and expanded. Brave youth comprise the core of this movement. The 1999 student uprisings in Tehran and Tabriz gave the world a glimpse of the explosive nature of Iran's young people who have suffered from unemployment, political suppression and social restrictions.

After wasting twenty-five years on the notion of change from within the system, there is no justification, whatsoever, for any country to advocate the policy of "engagement" with the ruling theocracy. Khatami's faction is a spent force and the dominant faction is up to its turban in terrorism, suppression and export of fundamentalism. But the third force, Iran's secular democracy movement is as resilient as ever in its demand for a regime change through an internationally monitored referendum.

US policy towards Iran must focus on full support for the democracy movement. At this defining moment in Iran's history, any other policy is a strategic catastrophe. Unconditional support for the status quo a quarter century ago should serve as a stark reminder.

Khatami's Perennial Promises

TEHRAN - Khatami warned his rivals on Wednesday they were turning young Iranians against the Islamic Republic.

Addressing tens of thousands of people in Tehran to mark a quarter-century of clerical rule, Khatami vowed to continue pressing for reform in the remainder of his term.

But the crowd, many of them bussed in from provincial cities, appeared largely disinterested in Khatami's words and his perennial promises of reform.

Analysts say the electoral row reflects inherent contradictions in the political system created by Khomeini which tried to marry the idea of a democratic republic with that of a theocracy headed by an all-powerful supreme leader.

"In our constitution we apparently have elections, a parliament and a president, but they are all caricatures," said Mohsen Sazgara.

Reflecting on the revolution, he said: "We thought we were going to have freedom, democracy, a real parliament and human rights, but we do not."

Reuters, Feb 11, 2004

Bussing Villagers, Free Food

... In a gathering that resembled more of a pleasant family outing than an outpouring of revolutionary fervor, Islamist hardliners joyfully chanted "Death to America".

Free food was also on offer to the participants, many of whom appeared to have come from poorer areas of the capital or outlying towns and villages.

AFP, Feb. 11, 2004

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

1201 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20004

Tel: 202-661-4675, Fax: 202-318-0402, E-mail: dispatch@usadيران.org

The Economist

February 10, 2004

Biggest Threat to Clerics: Pro-democracy Movement

HOW ironic it was that Iran's President Muhammad Khatami welcomed Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, on the prince's surprise visit to Tehran on Monday February 9th. While Charles will one day be the largely powerless figurehead of a parliamentary democracy that pretends to be a monarchy, events of recent days have shown his host to be the largely powerless figurehead of a pretend parliamentary democracy that is in fact a theocracy.

As the prince arrived in the Iranian capital, the country was in the middle of rather muted celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the Islamic revolution that overthrew its pro-western monarchy. This has coincided with one of Iran's worst political crises since the 1979 revolution...

For a while it seemed possible that President Khatami and other reformists were steeling themselves to confront the clerics... But last week Ayatollah Khamenei said the elections must go ahead. The reformists duly started to crumble. At the weekend, the president and the speaker of parliament wrote to the ayatollah, accepting that the election would go ahead on time. On Monday, an official of the president's own party, the League of Combatant Clerics, said it would not boycott the elections...

Ordinary Iranians are sick of having their personal freedom curtailed by the clerics, and frustrated at the economic stagnation that the Islamic revolution has brought. That said, they have also lost patience with the reformists' continual failure to deliver on their grand promises of change...

The biggest remaining threat to the power of the clerics... is the pro-democracy student movement. This has been quiescent during the latest crisis. However, the students have taken to the streets in large numbers before, and may do so again if the conservatives get their way and a sham election produces a parliament whose members fail to represent public opinion. Such fake democracy is only likely to bring forward the day when Iranians' tolerance of being bossed around by clerics finally snaps.

Financial Review (Australia)

February 12, 2004

Iran's Long, Lost Revolution

Its twenty-five years since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But there are many who don't have much to celebrate.

In spite of these often oppressive legacies, the Islamic Revolution has lost its way. After the Khomeinists ruthlessly disposed of their political rivals and co-revolutionaries in the power vacuum left by the Shah and the long war with Iraq was finally ended, belief in theocratic rule has steadily faded away.

"Do I think the clergymen should go? Certainly," says Ahmad, a software engineer from Shiraz... "Iran has had 25 years of going nowhere. We need to join up with the rest of the world. In the system we have we cannot do this. It is not working." ...

The sentiments of taxi driver Ali-Reza reflect a common belief in Iran that those running the country today are as bad, if not worse, than the autocratic regime of the Shah. "Before, the Shah wore the crown; now it is these mullahs," he says. "Those rags on their heads are there to hide the gold."

It is no small irony that as the Islamic republic marks what should be a glorious anniversary, Iran is lurching into probably its greatest political crisis since Khomeini's return. ...

The crisis was sparked when 3605 out of 8157 candidates were barred from standing. The vast majority of those black-listed were from the reform camp... However, while a significant majority of Iran's predominantly youthful public are impatient for change, events in Tehran have failed to stir the citizenry in the way reformist legislators would have liked. ... While the banned members called for people to take to the streets to show their support for reform, most Iranians were more interested in the local football results.

That such a lack of interest has afflicted a country normally so eager to make a political statement reflects the deep-seated cynicism with which Iranians look at their leaders... Many Iranians have simply given up hope that the change they seek will come by working within the existing establishment. And some believe their parliamentarians are as bad as the clerics who oppose them.

... Amin, a young man not old enough to have seen the last revolution, says: "Things will change when there is the next revolution. It might be two years, might be five years, inshAllah, but things will change for Iran." ...

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