

Election Blues:
Iran's Mixed Legacy of Constitutional Rule

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The internal strife in Iran unfolds at a propitious moment. Just a century earlier, in 1909, Iranian reformers prevailed in the country's first modern civil war known as the "Lesser Tyranny." They overcame the opposition of conservative royalists who had feared constitutional rule. Then, as now, Iranians wrangled over the meanings of freedom, patriotism, and law. Delegates to the parliament argued over policy and political philosophy. These debates inaugurated a new era in Iranian electoral politics as ordinary citizens recognized the need to protect the basic rights of individuals. Despite the limited success of Iranian democracy, the parliament prevailed as a symbol of the nation's future aspirations.

The tilling of Iran's political landscape has come at a heavy cost as witnessed in recent days. For sure, parliamentary politics did not fully supplant the impulse toward authoritarian politics. The dictatorial tendencies of the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Islamic Republic are both testimony to this trend.

By most measures the current electoral process in Iran remains far from free and barely attempts to realize the dreams of the women and Iran who are daily clamoring in the streets of Tehran, Isfahan, and elsewhere for justice, freedom, and change. Candidates are vetted beforehand by the Council of Guardians. Political parties representing views from the opposite ends of the political spectrum have no ability to participate freely in elections. The unprecedented allegations of election fraud by the supporters of Mirhossein Mousavi reinforce the belief that regime insiders have heavily manipulated the political process.

Still, the spontaneous protests illustrate powerfully that the political scene in Iran has become much more vibrant than many skeptics had initially thought possible. They also express the ardent desire of Iranians to participate fully in charting their nation's future. Luckily, today's protestors have history on their side.

At key junctures in the country's political life such as during the oil nationalization crisis of 1951 and the 1979 Revolution Iranians have shown their determination and success in challenging the status quo. This week, the Iranian public has once again shown its resolve in the face of extraordinary odds to insist upon fair and just elections.

The swift and stringent response of the state to the demonstrations orchestrated by supporters of the leading challenger, Mirhossein Mousavi, has only empowered the opposition. As the Supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, accepted the victory of the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the government blocked the use of cell phones. Such measures, however, have not deterred the supporters of Mousavi and the other candidates from denouncing the election results. Interestingly, the backers of Ahmadinejad have also taken to the streets to show skeptics the popularity the president still enjoys.

That Iranian politics has acquired a life of its own remains the best testament to people's desire for democracy. In recent weeks, as Iranian television aired the spirited debates between the presidential candidates, it was exciting to see Persian politicians roll up their sleeves and engage the public in an attempt to garner votes. Yet that relative political openness quickly dissipated with the government's repressive response to allegations of election fraud.

Faced with economic stagnation and regional threats, the government must confront widespread domestic dissatisfaction or run the risk of fueling the opposition and possibly a coup. A harsh and violent response would not only polarize the public, it would lend further credence to the allegations of Mousavi's supporters that the election was stolen from their man.

How can this impasse be resolved? The government can still settle the conflict without losing face by holding run-off elections in which watchdog organizations can participate as unbiased monitors. President Ahmadinejad's status will only be enhanced if he is assured of a victory under such circumstances. On the other hand, a win by Mirhossein Mousavi will demonstrate the resilience of the Islamic Republic and reinforce the government's claim as the best representative of the Iranian people. What better way to mark the victory of the civil war than by insuring that the country's current elections are indeed just and free?

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