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## Eyewitness Report

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# An Armenian view of Iran's transformation

by Haik Babookhanian

*The author is the editor-in-chief of Iravunk, newspaper of the Union for Constitutional Rights, Yerevan, Armenia. This article, which first appeared in that newspaper under the headline "Beyond the Southern Border," has been translated into English and slightly abridged.*

Beyond the southern border of Armenia, there is a country about which our conceptions were very limited for a long time, by Soviet propaganda. Even now, since our independence, and even after the expansion of mutual relations with that country, these conceptions are far from complete and are, sometimes, distorted. Maybe this was one of the reasons that, on the initiative of Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry and the embassy of Iran in Armenia, Armenian journalists had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the strongest country of the region.

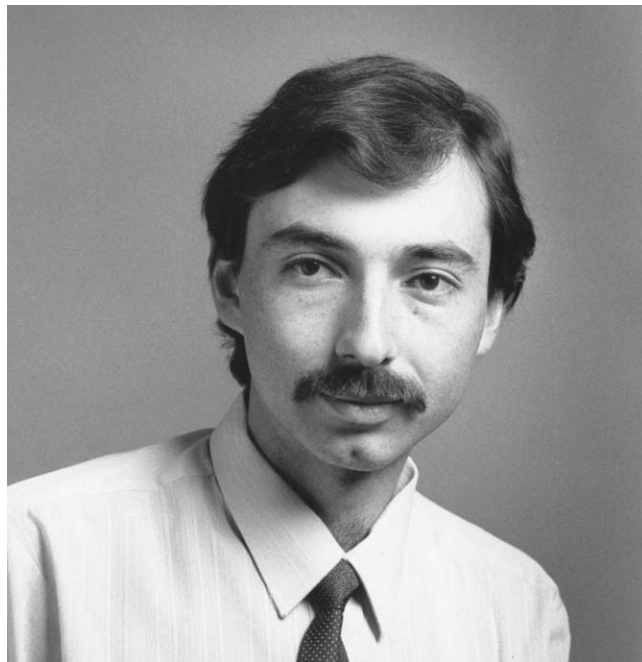
The population of Iran is 60 million, 98.5% of whom are Muslim. The territory is 1.648 million square kilometers. Iran has a unique geographical position, access to the sea, and natural resources.

With this article, we begin a series of articles about the political, economic, cultural, and social life of Iran.

### The Presidential elections

On May 23, the Presidential elections took place in Iran. The people's attitude toward the elections was quite staggering. Long queues formed at the polling stations; it was obvious that people trusted in the fairness of the elections, as shown by their activities. Invalids in their wheelchairs, old men who could hardly walk, and even a woman whose leg was in a plaster cast, turned up at the polling stations to vote. In the evening, when the elections were over, we met a young man with tears in his eyes, who had arrived too late to vote. At first, I thought maybe there was a punishment for people who didn't vote, but the young man replied, "Nothing of the kind; it's just that I believe that maybe my vote could be decisive for my nation's future."

We learned that the elections were organized by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and that the voting was half open and half closed, that is to say, there were no closed voting booths, but rather tables, not far from the ballot boxes. Iranians can



*Haik Babookhanian, editor-in-chief of Iravunk, newspaper of the Union for Constitutional Rights, Yerevan, Armenia, gives a first-hand report on his visit to Iran, which overlapped Iran's Presidential elections on May 23. Many Iranians were passionately involved in the election, he reports, knowing that their vote could be decisive for their nation's future.*

vote anywhere; every citizen has a voting book, in which a seal is set after voting, so that the person cannot vote twice. During the past 17 years, by the way, 17 elections took place in Iran.

By comparison with Armenia, the main difference between the governments is in their attitude toward the elections. The authorities of Iran consider that the people are the main wealth of the country. The day before the elections, the leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei, assured the people that the elections would be free and fair, describing them as "a great national and Islamic test." He said, "There won't be any violence during the elections. . . . Elections are the most important events for civilized nations." He underlined that the atmosphere of the country around the elections must be a moral one. And then, on the day of the elections, the leader of the country said, "Every nation is obliged to be the master of its own destiny."

Asked what expectations he has from the new President, he answered that he expects him to be the servant of the people, and to work for the welfare of the nation and the country.

We were able to be present at the polling station when Mohammad Khatami [the eventual winner] was voting. The people's respect for him was obvious. He, in turn, did not shun his voters. Khatami enjoys wide popularity. A 19-year-old man told us that students and youth fully support Khatami.

A university teacher, a middle-aged woman, insisted that 99% of the intellectuals would vote for the most liberal and most progressive leader. The national minorities and the northern part of the country also voted in favor of Khatami. People expect from Khatami an increase in freedom of speech and of the press, expansion of the rights of women and youth, and an increase in the country's independence.

Iran is moving, step-by-step, away from the restrictions that characterized the revolutionary and military period, and the government is doing everything it can to expand the freedom of the people. A new, young power structure is emerging in the country, which is playing a decisive role in political and social life.

Reforms are evident in the internal policy of the country; probably the foreign policy will not change. The new President, at his first press conference, sharply expressed his views about the United States and Israel, characterizing the latter as a racist state. Relations with Turkey and Afghanistan are becoming strained. As the Foreign Affairs Ministry's press secretary expressed it, God gave Iran a good Christian neighbor—Armenia—and two Islamic neighbors—Turkey and Afghanistan, which always create problems. Iran considers Russia as its strategic partner, with which it has excellent possibilities for cooperation. There is also a desire to expand cooperation with the other CIS countries, as well as with China, India, and Greece.

### **Focus on economic development**

Entering Teheran, the first things that strike one are the vast construction that is going on, the cleanliness of the city, and the abundance of flowers about the lawns and fountains. In the streets, they are only selling newspapers, juice, and ice cream.

It is important to emphasize the economic development of the country. In response to economic limitations and blockades launched by the West, Iran started to create a self-sufficient economy. In developing its own industry in various fields, it aspires to attain international standards of quality. In some areas, Iran has made a good showing. The country, which has huge resources of oil, is doing everything it can to reduce the dependence of its budget on oil exports. As Minister of Finance and Economics Mohamadhbbar told us, if the dependence of the country's economy on oil was 90% twenty years ago, then in 1989 it was reduced to 60%, and in 1996—to 15%.

Most of the big industrial enterprises were founded by Western and Soviet firms. But later, Iranian specialists developed the industry of their country. Thus, the biggest of the five motor plants, Iran Khodro, was founded in 1962, with a license from Chrysler, and during its first period, it produced 30 buses per month. After the Revolution, the plant broke off its dependence on the foreign firms and now, by its self-development, it is producing 6,500 buses, 6,000 micro-buses, and 100,000 cars per year. The plant has 8,000 workers. Many

other types of cars are being produced in Iran, and the production is exported to 26 countries.

The biggest steel production plant in the Middle East, near Spahan, which was founded 15 years ago and was built with the help of Italian and Japanese firms over a ten-year period, produces 2.5 million tons of steel per year; in three years, it will increase its production to 6 million tons. The production of the plant is exported to 26 countries.

We were surprised by the high level of industrial culture. The huge plants are spotlessly clean. The workers earn more than \$200. The factories, as a rule, have free hostels and clinics.

Iran is developing private property. Agriculture is almost completely privatized, and the number of the private schools and institutions is increasing. In regard to the private sector, the government exercises the functions of supervision and allocation of credit. It gives credits and privileges to promote industrial development. It is safe to say, that Iran is now an industrial country. In order to preserve the import-export balance, factories are allowed to import as much production as they have exported.

Iran is developing the infrastructural system of the country—the highways, pipelines, railways, reservoirs, and airports. It is planning to build new cultural centers, roads and bridges, libraries and museums, and so on.

### **Relations between Armenia and Iran**

Armenia-Iran economic exchanges reached \$200 million in 1996. As the finance and economics minister told us, Iran is trying to support Armenia in the solution of its energy problems, supplying gas and electricity. As a joint venture, it is going to reconstruct its tire plant, and is planning to organize perfume production. Iran is willing to support Armenia in order to achieve high production quality.

At Iran-Khodas, we were informed that there is a project to organize a joint auto factory, and, after the agreement is signed, a new type of car will be produced in Yerevan, over the next 12-14 months. Economic relations with Armenia are considered to be of strategic importance for Iran, and it hopes to become Armenia's number one trading partner. During the development of the relationship, Iran is prepared to buy and sell Armenian products to third countries.

As for the Armenian colony in Iran, the almost 200,000 Armenians living there have the status of a national-religious minority, which provides them with substantial privileges and independence. There are 25 Armenian schools with 10,000 pupils, in Teheran alone. There are many Armenian churches.

Thus, beyond our southern borders is one of the most important countries of the region. And, it is obvious, that by the expansion of our relationship with Iran, Armenia will have a possibility to revive its industry. This is also a reply to the authorities, who are blindly implementing the destructive conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund, claiming that there is no alternative.