

Iranian Crisis Could Ignite Regional War

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The celebrations for the 25th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, were marked by an unusually open conflict between the two adversary political poles, whose competition has dominated the nation's politics for the past decade. On the one side, were the conservatives, who turned out en masse for the huge demonstrations in Tehran, and other cities on Feb. 11. On the other, were the reformists, who have just been disenfranchised for the Feb. 20 parliamentary elections, by the arch-conservative Guardians Council (GC), the body charged with vetting candidates. Through a tug-of-war lasting weeks, the reformists have pressured the GC to reverse its disqualifications of over 3,000 candidates, including mainly representatives of their political faction.

In the middle of the fray, is President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami, champion of the reformist cause, who, though twice elected by a huge mandate to introduce reforms, has been straitjacketed by the checks imposed by the conservatives. Under immense pressure from his own reformist parliamentary majority and popular base, Khatami took the unusual step of using his anniversary speech on Feb. 11 to denounce the machinations of the conservatives. "Elections are a symbol of democracy," he said to crowds gathered in the capital's Azadi Square. "If this is restricted, it is a threat to the nation and the system." He added a classical understatement: "This threat is difficult to reverse." Khatami went on to reassert his commitment to a new political course: "For the prosperity of the nation, I don't know any path other than reforms. Whether I succeed or not, and whether obstacles prevent me from fulfilling my promises or not, I know no other path and won't choose a path other than reforms." He rejected both a "Western" model which denies religion and Iranian cultural identity, and the regime which the conservatives want to establish, which he compared to the Taliban.

"The second choice," he said, after the Western model, "is the path of extremism, which does not take into account the needs of our time, the demands or the votes of the people." Those who want this option, he said, "oppose freedom and democracy in the name of religion, as though their model is what we saw in recent years in Afghanistan, which was detestable and violent." Referring to the vetting of candidates, he said, "Blocking the demands of the people and their right to vote . . . causes frustration, especially among the young." Khatami called for a "third way," the way of reforms.

Government-organized elections for a new Parliament are

now slated to be held on Feb. 20, although the Interior Minister, provincial governors, and Speaker of the Parliament had earlier threatened not to participate. Of the more than 3,000 candidates initially disqualified by the Guardians Council, mostly reformists, over a thousand were requalified, followed by hundreds more, under orders from the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei. The definitive list, published on Feb. 11, does contain some leading reformists, but not anywhere near the number demanded by the reformists. Most of those reform candidates who have been approved, will not effectively run for office. Although they will not all officially call for a boycott, de facto that is what is happening.

An Unpredictable Outcome

It can be expected that very few Iranians will go to the polls, and of those who do go, many will cast a blank ballot, to signal their support for elections, but disgust with the sabotage. Since, to be elected, a candidate must garner one half of all votes cast in his district, plus one, it is possible that blank ballot voting could deprive the conservatives of their victory. In small cities and towns, where only thousands turn out to vote, a candidate does not need much to win. In Tehran, however, if a million votes are cast in one district, the winner is the one who gets 500,001 votes. There are 290 electoral districts, each of which can send one person to Parliament. As of Feb. 10, there were 25 districts where only conservative candidates were on the ballot, assuring them of 25 seats.

Sixty percent of the electorate is made up of youth. Since Iranians can vote at the age of 15, this social layer represents the determining factor. Thus far, the students' organizations have not called for a boycott, and it is not known what they will do. It was their vote, and that of women, which swept Khatami into office in 1997 and 2001.

If a tiny portion of the electorate, even as little as 15-20%, ends up electing a Parliament, it will be a farce, and will discredit not only the conservatives but the entire nation. Someone will have to assume political responsibility for the disaster: Thus, three or four members of the Guardians Council could be forced to resign; or the Presidency, or the government would step down. It is not expected that Supreme Leader Khamenei could be affected. Just who ends up taking the responsibility, will show who, ultimately, has won the factional strife.

Although some Farsi press reports, as well as Iranian sources, have mooted that Khatami could resign after the elections anyway, in his own sign of protest, this has recently been denied by high-level sources. They say Khatami—who had a 79% mandate—would stay on, in an extremely tight situation with a conservative Parliament, and would attempt to maintain his role as "philosopher"—not politician—especially on the international plane. This would be Khatami's way of trying to prevent the worst, until Presidential elections are held, as scheduled, in 2005. Which faction wins the Presi-



President Khatami, insisting upon his reform agenda, rejected both a “Western” model that denies Iran’s religious and cultural identity, and “the path of extremism,” which he compared to the “detestable and violent” model of the Taliban.

gency will determine the shape of the future. Only an extremely low voter turnout would elect a conservative.

It is not to be excluded that, following a conservative “victory” in the rigged elections, mass protests could break out, taking the political conflict into the streets, and transforming it into a bid to overthrow the system.

Influence of Developments in Iraq

The implications of a conservative coup will be felt throughout the region, most immediately in Iraq. Although some sectors of the most extremist conservative wing in Iran are said to back the confrontationist position of Shi’ite radical Moqtadar al Sadr, others are poised to open channels to the United States, in a bid for official standing in Iraq. Inside the United States, it is the neo-conservatives who have historically had links to the Iranian right-wing clerics, and want the reform movement to collapse. One self-proclaimed “universal fascist,” Michael Ledeen, recently wrote off the reform movement, saying it “did not exist.” Considering an Iranian government of right-wing clerics to be useful in “stabilizing” Iraq is pure folly. Even if one were to consider the situation in Iraq as hypothetically isolated from Iranian developments—which it is not—Iraq is headed for disaster. Unless Washington, through the United Nations, allows for democratic and free elections, all hell will break out in Iraq, and sooner rather than later. Not a few leading political figures in Iran, in fact, have noted the irony of professed “concern” in Washington over elections in Iran, while U.S. consul Paul Bremer and his Coalition Provisional Authority continue to block any such process in Iraq.

The escalation in resistance attacks, while the UN delegation was there in early February, has killed especially Iraqi

policemen and recruits, targeted as collaborators. And the unprecedented bombing attacks against the two major Kurdish parties’ offices in Irbil, on Feb. 1, carried clear signs of interference from regional powers outside the country, who coordinated the attack with elements able to penetrate Kurdish security. A concentrated assault on Feb. 12, against a base in Fallujah being visited by U.S. Commander John Abizaid, provided stunning proof of the fine-tuned intelligence that the resistance forces have, regarding U.S. officials’ movements. If the demands being made for real elections, by the highest Shi’ite religious leader, Ayatollah Ali al-Hussein al-Sistani, are not met, the neutrality of the Shi’ite forces could rapidly turn into military hostility. At the same time, internal frictions among various ethnic and religious communities, epitomized by the attacks against the Kurds, could escalate into civil war. This is a forecast shared by a number of regional experts and diplomats.

The Game in Washington

That Iran is in the sights of the neo-con crowd in Washington, and is being targeted for regime change, is nothing new. However, as the Iranian election crisis escalated, so did the rhetoric from those known quarters. U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton lashed out on Feb. 12, accusing Iran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, and failing to comply with a commitment last year to suspend its uranium enrichment program. “There’s no doubt in our mind that Iran continues to pursue a nuclear weapons program,” Bolton said, during a security conference in Berlin. “They have not yet, in our judgment, complied even with the commitments they made in October to suspend their uranium enrichment activities,” he added. “Essentially, they are not spinning centrifuges, but their activity to put together the components they need for their uranium enrichment program continues,” Bolton said. Reports had appeared that same day, according to which the IAEA had found designs for centrifuges in Iran.

Bolton’s charges came on the heels of the Pakistani nuclear scandal, whereby top scientist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan acknowledged having given out nuclear secrets to persons in other countries including Iran.

Although Iran is a signer of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and recently signed an additional protocol allowing for intrusive inspections, the drumbeat against supposed nuclear arms capabilities has been getting louder. In the current crisis situation, one very grave danger is that elements in Israel may seize on the nuclear charges, and exploit the conservatives’ retaking Parliament, as a pretext to implement their long-standing plan, to bomb Iran’s nuclear energy plant at Bushehr.