



The Circus Is in Tehran

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There were no elections in Iran last Friday, whatever you may read. The "turnout" was shockingly low, even by past standards, as is demonstrated by the obvious panic in Tehran, where the mullahs kept the polls open an extra five hours. This was not, as they said, to make sure the patriotic citizens of the capital could drop their ballots in the box, but because they had to bus the reluctant faithful and the subservient government employees to the election offices, so as to be able to claim a large, voluntary participation. Even so, the official figure of 60 percent has no relationship to the actual event, in which perhaps 10 or 15 percent actually "voted."

The outcome was preordained, both because there was no room on the ballot for any genuine opponent of the regime--all names are cleared by

Khamenei's loyal servants--and because the regime decided in advance who would serve in the next parliament. The fraud was so obvious that even the European Union denounced the "elections" as neither free nor fair, despite their wish to pass off the Islamic Republic (as former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and current McCain-campaign adviser once famously put it) as "a democracy." In its write-up, *The Economist* calls it a "heavily constricted democracy," which many intellectuals said about Mussolini or Stalin.

Not surprisingly, the observers and pundits cannot agree on the "meaning" of the announced results. The Islamic Republic operates in a sort of code, and the cypher is closely guarded by the small handful of grim-faced mullahs and ayatollahs

who surround the Supreme Leader, the long-suffering Ali Khamenei. He has terminal cancer, and from time to time lapses into a coma (most recently a couple of weeks ago, when a long-scheduled meeting with United Arab Emirates leaders was suddenly canceled, and the Khamenei was rushed to the hospital in a coma.

In this world of schemes and shadows, where a Hobbesian war of all against all rages over the succession to Khamenei, it is pointless to try to figure out "what it means." Some of the watchers say it was good news for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, while others see it as a significant setback for him, with the same certainty as the former. Either way, it tells us little about what the Iranian people want. It may, however, tell us something about what the tyrants intend. The *Independent* has it right: It's "a power struggle within the conservative camp." Maybe, but the new Majlis doesn't look very different from the current group, and you have to strain to interpret the outcome as a blow to Ahmadinejad. Yes, there are some hard-liners who don't like him. So what else is new? There was plenty of that after the last presidential elections, long before inflation hit 20 percent, and the verbal confrontation with America, Israel, Jews, the United Nations Security Council, and even the Europeans had reached their current intensity. Khamenei--the man who matters most in Iran--likes to see conflict among those fighting for his job, and there will be lots of it.

The *Independent's* editorialists focus on a very interesting voting district for their analysis: the "holy city" of Qom, which overwhelmingly went for Ari Larijani, a smooth-talking pol who is usually described as a "pragmatic conservative," a phrase often reserved for former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. The phrase is meant to portray a nasty hard-liner who nonetheless is reasonable, someone who can make deals with the West (none of the hard-liners has the slightest interest in pushing Iran in the direction of a more civil society). As the *Independent* puts it,

Some Iran watchers see the vote in a clerical stronghold like Qom as a sign that the powerful clergy have lost confidence in Ahmadinejad and may rally behind Larijani, if he stands in 2008. Those of us in the West who support jaw-jaw rather than war-war with Iran can only trust that a new president in Iran--not to mention a new president in the White House--might offer a way out of the current depressing log-jam.

Which is a double error. First, because no president of the Islamic Republic holds enough power to fundamentally change Iranian foreign policy. The president doesn't have that authority (Khamenei does). And second, because the "powerful clergy" in Qom include many who are in open opposition to the regime itself, not to one figurehead or another. In recent elections, Qom registered the lowest voter "turnout" in the country, a clear sign of protest. Many senior clerics, including some of the grand ayatol-

lahs, are either under house arrest (Ayatollah Montazeri, at one time the heir apparent to Khomeini, is the most famous). Thousands of others are imprisoned there.

The regime made it quite clear that nothing of any importance is going to change. Two days after the election, another nine publications were shut down. So much for any sign of open debate in Iran.

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