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The Battle for Iran's Future

By Bagher Asadi

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TEHRAN— Looking back on three decades of international news coverage of Iran gives me a squeamish feeling. For a host of reasons -- historical-civilizational significance, geostrategic position, pre-eminence in the Persian Gulf and, not least, the still unfolding dynamism of the 1979 revolution -- Iran has consistently been at the center of international attention. So much so, in fact, that a decade ago the American scholar Graham Fuller called his book on Iran "The Center of Universe."

There have been many times when I felt elated to see my country and its affairs viewed with keen interest everywhere -- including in 1979, when the Iranian people brought down the monarchy, and in 1997, when they enthusiastically elected President Mohammad Khatami as a symbol and beacon of much-needed reform.

Then there have been occasions for a different type of feeling. Last month's earthquake was one such event. Another, of course, is the nuclear imbroglio.

The nuclear issue -- which is neither my cup of tea nor a matter of daily bread and butter for ordinary Iranians -- has for months now received the lion's share of outside attention, diverting attention from the burning issues my country has been grappling with. Far and away the most important is the coming elections for the seventh session of the Majlis, Iran's 290-seat Parliament. What is practically at stake in this vote, set for Feb. 20, is nothing less than the future of Iran's governance structure.

The Sixth Majlis, elected in early 2000, has been dominated by the reformers allied with President Khatami. Yet its will has been effectively blocked by the Council of Guardians -- a conservative supervisory body composed of six experts in Islamic law, called mujtahids, and six civil lawyers. The reform movement's failure since 1997 to make good on its

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promises -- a result not only of the efforts of the antireform coalition but also of the reformers' own lack of vision and vigor -- has led to a general state of despair and resignation.

The town council elections of last February, which had an astonishingly low turnout of 10 percent to 15 percent in Tehran and other major cities, should have served as a national wake-up call. The conservative ticket was victorious simply because it is very good at getting its supporters to the polls. The low percentage of voters clearly signaled a deep sense of political exhaustion and disenchantment with the status quo.

Yet the conservative bloc and its authoritarian fringe -- which had seen a succession of devastating defeats from 1997 to 2001 -- were emboldened by last year's result and have set their eyes on recapturing the Parliament next month. Should this happen, the immediate result would be that President Khatami's hands would be tied for the rest of his final term of office, which expires in 2005.

In the longer term, the conservatives see parliamentary victory as a step to a total consolidation of the governance structure, which they hope could be sealed in the presidential elections in 2005. This even though conservative control of the Majlis would inevitably widen the gap between the overwhelming majority of the populace and those wielding power. In addition, the conservatives' blatant disdain for human rights and republican aspects of governance, among other things, would inevitably invite outside censure and further complicate an already tenuous relationship.

The conservatives' best chance next month is another low turnout. Thus we have seen a wide range of political and propaganda campaigns that have been accompanied by legal and pseudo-legal administrative measures, including stringent new vetting procedures intended to disqualify prominent reform candidates in Tehran and other big cities.

The best hope for the reformers is a high turnout, which could be spurred by an active participatory campaign and, more important, a heated national debate on just what this election means to the future of the country. The likely turnout is very difficult to predict or even analyze at this stage.

Thus with the widespread disenchantment with official policies and the bubbling restlessness among the growing ranks of the youth, it is not hard to fear the future direction of events in the case of a conservative victory. A determined drive for total power by the conservative coalition has the potential to ignite an intrinsically explosive situation. If history is any indication, anachronistic campaigns, let alone follies, more often than not turn sour and backfire.

Even if the reform movement retains its majority in the Parliament, it is vital that all the homegrown political forces dedicated to meaningful, long-term reform in Iranian society undergo a substantive soul-searching.

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The strategy and tactics that have failed since 1997 will have to be re-visited and critiqued in earnest.

In the long run, the current failures of reformers aside, the yearning on a national scale for real change will undoubtedly endure, and even strengthen. And one thing should be clear to all those in the fray: what is at stake in Iran today is the rule of law, a representative, accountable and transparent government, and practical respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights.

In fact, these are exactly the issues that have been at stake in the country for the last century, since the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, with periodic ebbs and flows. The current drama should be seen as yet another episode of the same old family feud, albeit in a much different world and a much worse neighborhood. Left alone and untampered with it will sort itself out, and definitely for the better in the long run.

In the end, what is really lacking -- and has been lacking for at least a century -- has been a systematic attempt to build a civil society. Had the political forces in the country been more conscious of the instrumental role civil society plays in the institutionalization of politics, we would have fared much better in establishing more durable institutions and political structures. This was as true in the early decades of the century, and in the Iran of the 1950's under Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, as it has been since 1979. And its abject neglect since 1997 should be seen as a major cause of the failure of the reform movement.

Until Iranians develop a solid base for a robust, dynamic civil society, we will not be able to make political achievements irreversible. Hindsight tells us that achieving comprehensive national development, which has thus far eluded us despite our oil riches, depends on achieving fully democratic governance.

Drawing (Drawing by Warren Linn)

Bagher Asadi, an Iranian career diplomat, is a member of the United Nations secretary general's panel on civil society.

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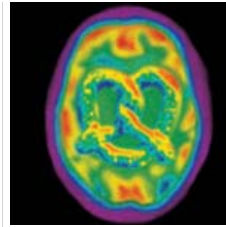


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