

Iran: Elections show political bankruptcy of the “reformers”

By Ulrich Rippert
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The most important result of last Friday’s parliamentary elections in Iran was the complete failure of the so-called reformers around President Mohammed Khatami. Seven years ago, Khatami was elected with a great majority, because large sections of the Iranian people rejected the reactionary regime of the mullahs, the religious rulers of Iran. However, at no point has his government been prepared to seriously confront the conservatives in the Council of Guardians, the unelected institution controlling all institutions of state power, and to defend democratic rights.

On the other hand, the religious hard-liners—who have little credibility among the population but control large parts of the economy, the state apparatus, the judiciary and national television—have energetically expanded their regime of oppression. More than a dozen newspapers were banned in the course of the past few years, and political opponents were thrown into prison. Strikes or protests were terrorised by paramilitary militias, and show trials were being used to foment anti-Semitism.

Khatami and his faction, the reformers, constantly backed down in the face of this pressure. They saw their main task in calling on the population to preserve “peace and order,” while social conditions continued to deteriorate and unemployment steadily rose. Thus, the initial hopes that people had placed in this faction were systematically frustrated.

Based on this role of the reformers, the conservative faction of the clergy was able to win last Friday’s elections with a large majority. The reformers, who previously had the largest parliamentary faction, are now down to 25 of 290 seats.

In a pompous speech on election night, religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed that “the people” had won the elections. Nothing could be further from the truth. During the past weeks, the expression of any opinion different from those of the religious rulers was brutally suppressed. Two days before the elections, the two most influential opposition newspapers were banned. Even before, the Council of Guardians had banned more than 2,300 candidates of the reformers, which prompted nearly 1,000 further reformers to withdraw their candidacy in protest.

In the region of the capital Tehran, only 2 million of 8 million eligible voters went to the polls. On a national average, participation reached its lowest level since the founding of the Islamic republic in 1979. From 67.4 percent four years ago, it dropped to 50.5 percent.

Immediately after the polls had closed, Khamenei announced

further measures of state repression. He said the Council of Guardians had resolved that, given the elimination of most reform-minded MPs, the newly elected parliament would “concentrate on the strengthening of Islam” and the “reinforcement of faith and morality in public life.”

Angry about the undemocratic and arrogant behaviour of the religious rulers, and disappointed with the cowardly retreat of the reformers, people took to spontaneous protests in several Iranian cities last weekend. Police and paramilitary troops brutally attacked the demonstrators in order to stifle the emergence of any broader movement. At least four people were killed in street clashes in the constituency of Izeh in the southwestern province of Khuzestan during protests against the local election result, which was seen as a fraud.

“According to government sources, disappointed voters had attacked the prefecture, the town hall, the court building as well as banks, and had set official vehicles on fire. Security forces fired at the demonstrators and used tear gas,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported. In the city of Firuzabad, located about 100 kilometres south of Shiraz, four more people were killed, including one policeman. An angry crowd had demanded a recount of the vote.

The failure of the reformers, which became fully apparent in these elections, contains important political lessons that emerge clearly if one draws a balance sheet of the 25 years that have passed since the Islamic revolution.

The revolutionary uprising that led to the overthrow of the despised regime of the shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was characterised by a fundamental contradiction. While the source of social resistance and revolutionary dynamics lay in the factories, industrial centres and impoverished agrarian regions, the movement was led by a group of clerics around Ayatollah Khomeini. The latter owed his role not to any political genius or strength of his own, but to the lack of a socialist alternative. The Communist Tudeh Party, which was oriented towards Moscow, as well as the People’s Mujahedin supported Khomeini—or Bani-Sadr, the initial president of the “Islamic Republic”—in the name of something they called “Islamic socialism.”

However, Khomeini proved to be an unscrupulous defender of bourgeois national interests. While he massacred thousands of left-wingers, drowned every independent stirring of the working class in blood and brutally suppressed any strivings for some cultural autonomy (i.e., by the Kurdish population), he nationalised the banks and key industries, including the oil

corporations, shut off the national economy and built a certain amount of infrastructure, most importantly in the sector of education, to the benefit of broad layers of the population.

From its beginnings, the Islamic republic was characterised by sharp conflicts among the ruling circles about the role of the state in economic life and the opening up of the country to the world economy. The Iran-Iraq War put off this problem for a couple of years, but it re-emerged afterward under conditions of an economy devastated by this war.

At the heart of the dilemma and instability of today's regime lies the weakness of the Iranian bourgeoisie, which results from the impossibility of any sustained national development under conditions of an increasingly globalised world economy. All measures to reintegrate the country into the world economy undermine some of the traditional privileges and sinecures of the ruling section of the clergy and the *bazaris*, the traditional national bourgeoisie. At the same time, integration into the world economy requires intensified attacks on the living standards of the working people in Iran, which are already low by any standards.

Under these conditions, the reformers were never prepared to seriously challenge the privileged position of the clerical rulers and their backers. They feared that the conflict raging within the ruling elite would weaken the state as a whole and favour the development of a popular movement from below. This is why, again and again, they bowed to all measures aimed at strengthening the state apparatus.

The bankruptcy of the reformers throws into sharp relief the role of the German government and its foreign minister, Joschka Fischer of the Green Party. Despite the growing state oppression in Iran, they developed close economic and political ties with the regime. When President Khatami visited Berlin in summer 2000 in order to finalise several large economic projects, Fischer's praise of the "democratic reform process" knew no bounds.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Green foreign minister stressed at the time: "The democratic reform process led by President Khatami is a great chance for human rights, democracy, peace and stability in a region fraught with dangers, not least for us." When the interviewer remarked that Khatami did not personify the whole political system in Iran, Fischer replied: "He is backed by a broad majority of the people.... It would be a great mistake for us not to support the reformers." This, he said, was not only a matter of reason, but also "in the best German interest."

While democracy and human rights were continuously being curbed in Iran, business boomed. In early February, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, a think tank sponsored by the Greens, reported that the amount of foreign investments in Iran had risen by 400 percent during the past two years. The same report included the information that a consortium led by the German Siemens Corp. had obtained the commission to build a new sewerage system for Tehran.

Germany has for many years been the most important foreign trade partner of Iran. German factories supply machinery, vehicles and technical facilities—a constantly growing amount of exports. "The year 2003 will mark a new record," the *Financial Times Deutschland* quoted Michael Tockuss, the chairman of the

German-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, last December. In the first quarter of that year, he said, German exports had risen by 24 percent. He expected a total trade volume of more than 3 billion euros. Iranian investments in Germany were even higher. Until recently, Tehran held 8 percent of Krupp Thyssen, one of the major European steel corporations. This was lowered to 5 percent, however, due to pressure from the US.

Iran's share of OPEC's total oil production amounts to about 14 percent, and its territory includes 16 to 18 percent of the world's natural gas resources. In addition, bordering the Caspian Sea in the north, and the Persian Gulf and the Arabic Sea in the south, Iran occupies a key position in the struggle for control over global energy supplies. The easiest route to bring Caspian oil to the world market would run across Iran.

Since the Iraq war, the US government has significantly increased its pressure on Tehran. The country was virtually encircled. To its western border lies occupied Iraq; in the east, Iran has a long border with Afghanistan.

Their well-known rhetoric about the US as the main enemy notwithstanding, some representatives of the mullahs have clearly signalled their readiness to collaborate. At the end of January, *heraldonline* reported that a delegation of US congressional staff would visit Iran in February for high-ranking talks for the first time since 1979.

In the British *Guardian* last week, Martin Woollacott put forward the thesis that the Bush administration was prepared to work together with the conservative Council of Guardians. Under the headline "Iran's die-hards will dump democracy—if the US helps," he wrote: "Washington looks ready to strike a bargain with the rump republic."

He continued: "Iran's political crisis has come at a time when its international isolation is diminishing. In spite of questions over Iranian sincerity on nuclear matters, seen again yesterday in Vienna, a certain convergence of US and Iranian interests is evident. American problems in Iraq and Afghanistan mean that Washington needs Tehran even more than it did before."

Such speculation has not been substantiated so far. But one thing is certain: following the parliamentary elections and the political bankruptcy of the reformers, political instability in Iran will increase. The dead and wounded of the past days are an indication of sharp social and political tensions that will demonstrate with ever greater urgency the necessity of a socialist party uniting the working class and the oppressed of all nationalities and religions throughout the region.

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