



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Judith and Sidney Swartz Director
Prof. Shai Feldman

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

Assistant Director for Research
Naghmeb Sohrabi, PhD

Senior Fellows
Abdel Monem Said Aly, PhD
Khalil Shikaki, PhD
Yezid Sayigh, PhD

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the
Economics of the Middle East*
Nader Habibi

*Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor
of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*
Kanan Makiya

*Senior Fellow on the Myra and
Robert Kraft Chair in Arab Politics*
Asher Susser, PhD

President of Brandeis University
Jehuda Reinharz, PhD

Middle East Brief

Is Nothing Sacred in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Dr. Naghmeh Sohrabi

On Friday June 4, 2010, during the ceremonies held on the anniversary of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death in his shrine outside of Tehran, Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, was heckled off the stage. "I apologize to the crowd. Time is very short, but some people are not allowing the ceremony to continue," he said, and walked off.¹ But the rumor mills, on both government and opposition sites, prolonged the story by reporting that after walking off, Khomeini delivered a slap (or, in other versions, three slaps and a punch) to the minister of interior, Mustafa Muhammad Najjar, for insulting the family of Khomeini.² Regardless of whether or not one or more slaps or a punch actually happened, the heckling of Khomeini's grandson, supposedly for having supported the opposition to Ahmadinejad's government, elicited condemnations from a wide spectrum of the political elite inside Iran, ranging from Mehdi Karrubi, nominal leader of the Green movement, to conservative member of Parliament, Ali Motahari.³ Underlying all of these responses was the question: Is there nothing sacred anymore in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

While on the surface, Iran is where it was a year ago or perhaps worse off—the streets of Tehran calm, Ahmadinejad still president and perhaps more powerful than before, the amorphous opposition going by the name of the Green movement relegated to memory (and at times to issuing statements) and functioning more as a symbol of hope than as an effective

movement, and Iran the target of a fourth round of UN Security Council sanctions—the June 12, 2009, election and its aftermath have fundamentally altered the political landscape of Iran. This Brief examines three significant aspects of this change: the uncertainty regarding the future of electoral politics in Iran; the effects of the election on the dual nature of contemporary Iran as simultaneously a republic and a theocracy; and the place and efficacy of the Green movement.

Where's My Vote?

Whether or not the tenth presidential election in Iran was rigged is impossible to determine. Was Mir Hossein Mousavi the winner of the election and robbed of his victory, as he claimed on June 13, 2009, or was Ahmadinejad, who still had an important electoral base, particularly outside the capital, the true winner? Regardless of the answer, the manner by which Ahmadinejad was proclaimed president, with “the Ministry of Interior...quick to declare a victor and the Leader officially congratulat[ing] Ahmadinejad before a final tally was released or the Guardian Council could make time to review complaints,”⁴ and the whopping 64 percent that constituted his announced vote share (compared with the 34 percent attributed to the runner-up, Mousavi)—which, considering the 85 percent turnout, gave Ahmadinejad more votes than any other president in the history of the Islamic Republic—put an undeniable question mark on the legitimacy of this election.

Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic has held roughly one election a year, adhering to article 6 of its constitution, which states: “The affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution.”⁵ Iranian elections, while not fair, had up to now been, within constraints, free: That is to say, the politically motivated vetting of all candidates by the unelected Guardian Council meant that not everyone could stand for the elections provided for in the constitution, but once the roster of candidates was announced, people had the right to vote for whomever they chose, and their votes were more or less counted accurately.⁶

The best-known example of this was the election of Muhammad Khatami in 1997. Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, Khatami's then rival, was famously supported by “the country's most powerful clerical organization, the influential Friday prayer leaders in almost all the major cities, the majority of members of parliament, the majority of members of the Council of Guardians, the minister of intelligence, and, most important, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.”⁷ Nonetheless, Khatami won the election with 70 percent of the vote share, and the reformist era of Iranian politics was officially born.

Somewhat similarly, in the first round of the 2005 presidential election, Ahmadinejad was seen to be the candidate with the least amount of mainstream official support; in particular, he lacked the public backing of the Supreme Leader, who was rumored to have supported either Muhammad-Baqer Qalibaf (ex-chief of the Police Forces and current mayor of Tehran) or Ali Larijani (ex-head of Iran's broadcasting services, security advisor to the

Naghmeh Sohrabi is the Assistant Director for Research at the Crown Center.

The opinions and findings expressed in this brief are those of the author exclusively, and do not reflect the official positions or policies of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies or Brandeis University.

Supreme Leader, and current speaker of Parliament). While there were rumors of ballot stuffing in favor of Ahmadinejad during the first round of the 2005 election, none of Khamenei's supposedly preferred candidates or candidates with stronger institutional ties, such as Qalibaf and Larijani, was fraudulently pushed through the electoral process.⁸ For thirty years, the expectation was, more or less, that if you voted, your vote got counted.

This understanding worked to create something of a political contract between the state and the people. From the point of view of the electorate, in a theocratic state with unelected institutions holding the bulk of power, elections became the main instrument through which the people believed they could affect politics. Those who voted understood the restrictions and boundaries within which they were voting, but they also expected that within that framework, their vote would be respected. Similarly, arguments in favor of boycotting elections (arguments that may have affected the outcome of the 2005 presidential election as they were almost exclusively made by those who had supported the reformist agenda in previous elections) were based on the underlying assumption that withholding one's vote amounted to a meaningful act that itself could affect the political landscape. From the point of view of the political system, these elections served two important functions: They became a public forum through which the elite resolved or attempted to resolve their ever increasing factional disputes; and they became an important tool for demonstrating regime legitimacy.⁹ It is only within this framework and this implicit political contract that the most prevalent slogan of the June 2009 protests, "Where is my vote?" makes sense.

In her assessment of the June 2009 events, the Iranian journalist and blogger Masih Alinejad noted that the post-June 12 crisis came about as a result of two related miscalculations: The regime miscalculated the intensity of popular reaction to such widespread allegations of voter fraud, while the people miscalculated the level of violence the regime would resort to in order to quell the opposition.¹⁰ As such, the real test of the effects of the June election on the Islamic Republic as a political system will come in the next set of elections, particularly the presidential ones. How will a system that has counted on electoral politics, even of an imperfect kind, to give meaning to its particular brand of oligarchic and/or factional politics behave when and if those politics become meaningless for a significant part of the population? Or from a reverse perspective, can those in power ever contemplate an election without fear of

another oppositional mobilization on the part of the public? In other words, what happens when a system is seen as no longer abiding by its own rules and its own traditions?

Neither a Republic nor a Theocracy

The answers to these questions lie in another aspect of the Islamic Republic that has been severely affected by the events of the past year: namely, its dual nature as a theocracy and a republic. Article 1 of the constitution explicitly states that "the form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic, endorsed by the people of Iran on the basis of their longstanding belief in the sovereignty of truth and Quranic justice."¹¹ In other words, sovereignty in Iran is understood as deriving from two main sources: the people and Islam. This dual nature of the state has shaped the form of politics in Iran over the past thirty years, as well as much of its factional discourse particularly since 1997. It has pit elected institutions, such as the presidency and Parliament, against unelected ones, such as the Guardian Council and the Supreme Leader. The election of Khatami in 1997 and the birth of the reformists as a viable political power in mainstream Iranian politics brought to the fore the question of whether Iran could be both Islamic and democratic—and, if so, how. Reformists sought to increase their power not by arguing for an overhaul of the Iranian political system but by invoking the republican aspects of the Iranian constitution and emphasizing the legitimacy of the republican, as opposed to theocratic, sides of the system. For example, in 1998 the Khatami government added city council elections (called for in the constitution but not yet implemented) to Iran's roster of elections. This not only allowed for more reform-minded city councils to come into power but also raised or perhaps created the expectation among the population that elections and election campaigns could function as spaces for more open debate in the public arena.¹²

In the days and months after June 12, 2009, it became transparent that what had occurred in Iran on the level of power politics was a battle between the old guard—that encompassed the bulk of Iran's political elite, whether conservative, pragmatist, or reformist, and the new guard—the radical Right. This new guard was seen to be an educated, often nonclerical generation, many of them current or previous members of the Revolutionary Guard and shaped by the experience of the Iran-Iraq War. Their rhetoric, and at times their security-oriented mentality, seemed to indicate that they believed in a return to a mythical "golden years" of the 1980s, with its

conservative social atmosphere, statist economy, and international isolation. What has transpired in the past year, however, requires a revision of this view: Their end goal seems to be not so much a return to a utopian past, unsullied by years of internal reform, but the acquisition of total power. Two examples of the radical Right's crossing of red lines as a means of both acquiring and consolidating power come to mind.

First, the heckling of Seyyed Hassan Khomeini in his grandfather's shrine demonstrates how his sacred place as the grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic was overridden by displeasure with respect to his support of Mousavi and Karrubi (and, by implication, of the opposition that emerged from the election). In an open letter addressed to Khomeini's grandson, Muhammad Ali Ansari, the head of the committee that oversees Ayatollah Khomeini's mourning ceremonies, details the ways in which Ahmadinejad seemingly purposefully arrived late to the shrine and extended his speech in order to leave little or no time for Khomeini, who was to follow him. When Ansari asked why his entreaties to shorten his speech were ignored, Ahmadinejad allegedly turned to him and said, "Who do you think you are? . . . I'm the president of this nation." And Mustafa Muhammad Najjar, the minister of interior, added that since Ahmadinejad received 25 million votes, no one has the right to "limit his speech."¹³

Additionally, in an unprecedented move, Ahmadinejad wrote a letter to the head of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, pointing out to him what he considered to be discrepancies between a series of new laws, passed by the parliament and approved by the Guardian Council, and the constitution.¹⁴ What was striking, as noted by the conservative news website Tabnak, was not only that the letter implied that the Guardian Council had been mistaken in its assessment but, even more importantly, that it had overstepped the separation of powers laid out in the Iranian constitution and adhered to until recently.¹⁵ Jannati's somewhat curt response reflects this reading of the letter and implicitly admonishes Ahmadinejad, reminding him that "after this council's determinations and the last stages [of a bill], the rest of the officials and institutions have no responsibility but to oversee its execution." He ends by chiding him, noting that the constitution does not give the president the right to "interfere" in the duties of various officials in the system.¹⁶

What stands out in the aftermath of the June 2009 election is not the weakening (or perhaps the eventual elimination) of the system's republican aspects so

much as the change of its *theocratic* aspects to those of an authoritarian regime with a strong military coloring. This does not mean that the language of politics is no longer a religious one or that the institutional power of Ayatollah Khamenei has been diminished. In his sermon on the anniversary of Khomeini's death, Ayatollah Khamenei actually emphasized the nature of the Iranian government as an Islamic one, stating that "the fulfillment of pure Islam would not be possible except through the sovereignty of Islam and the establishment of an Islamic system. The Imam [Ayatollah Khomeini] considered the Islamic Republic to be the embodiment of Islamic governance."¹⁷

For all the talk of Islamic governance though, it's clear that since June 2009, the theocratic elements of the regime are increasingly overshadowed by its authoritarian ones. In this context, it is significant that in the aftermath of June 2009 the clergy in Qum were and have been silenced to the point that even Ayatollahs such as Makarem-Shirazi and Javadi-Amoli were intimidated for "suggesting cooperation as a way out of the political impasse."¹⁸

Going Green

The green of the shawl that Muhammad Khatami wrapped around Mir Hossein Mousavi's neck during the 2009 presidential campaign outlived the campaign and gave its name to the amorphous "movement" that sprung up after the elections. The words "Green movement" became synonymous with the hopes and dreams (and anxieties and nightmares) of those who used them; for some, particularly commentators and activists outside of Iran, they came to embody the nascent democratic movement of the people that arose out of the unprecedented and widespread protests that occurred in and outside Iran in the summer of 2009. As the year unfolded, amidst sham trials of journalists, activists, and ordinary people and the government's unflinching violence and continued arrests, the numbers of protestors declined, culminating in the cancellation of demonstrations initially called for by the nominal leaders of the movement, Mehdi Karrubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, and the relative calm that accompanied the first anniversary of June 12.¹⁹

Much ink has been spilled trying to understand the viability of the Green movement and its significance for the future of Iran. Commentators, particularly outside of Iran, have alternately lamented the movement's demise, celebrated its durability, or invoked

it to argue for engaging in diplomacy with Iran, applying sanctions against Iran, or bringing about regime change.

One aspect of the movement that has been less emphasized is the ways in which the “Green movement,” perhaps better called the “Green struggle,”²⁰ has become a fight to defend the values of the reform movement of the late nineties and early aughts—and, relatedly, a struggle to maintain, while improving on, the dual nature of the Islamic Republic. Looked at from the perspective of the movement’s elite, it is clear that the battle inside the country between the Greeners and the government is a fight to maintain the characteristics of the system as it was before June 2009 (and perhaps even before 2005) in the face of the radical Right’s desire to forge a new system of governance. In other words, among the Greeners inside Iran, the movement is a continuation of the efforts of the reformists, during the Khatami period and beyond, to enhance the rule of the people within the framework of the Islamic Republic.²¹

On June 15, 2010, Mir Hossein Mousavi published what he calls the “Green Charter,” in which he lays out “the [r]oots and [g]oals” of the movement.²² At the beginning of the document, he clearly notes that “[b]ased on its commitment to [these] principles and fundamental human, religious, moral and national values, the Green Movement considers itself to be a purifier and reformer of the course taken in the Islamic Republic after the Revolution. Therefore, it will focus its efforts on the framework of the Constitution and [ensure] respect for the people’s votes and opinions.”(Brackets are in the translation.)²³ The Charter very often returns to this point, calling the constitution the “common covenant” of the Iranian people and declaring that “implementing the constitution with no negligence” is “the main fundamental strategy of the Green Movement.”²⁴ The reliance on the constitution is a clear invocation of the Khatami period, with its emphasis on a system that “abided by the law,” and in which the Iranian constitution was clearly regarded as capable of steering the system closer to “the rule of the people” [mardum salari] and away from the arbitrariness of the then conservative opposition.

Seyyed Mustafa Tajzadeh, a reformist who served under Khatami during the latter’s years as both minister of culture and president, echoed these sentiments in a beautifully crafted open letter entitled “Mother, Father, We Remain Accused,” written after he had served ten months in prison between June 2009 and March 2010.²⁵ In it, Tajzadeh reveals that his interrogators would compare the actions of the current government to those

of the earlier generation of revolutionaries, such as the author himself and Mousavi, who arrested, executed, and eventually crushed all opposition to the nascent Islamic Republic. Though at first Tajzadeh justifies the violence of the early days of the revolution by noting that those were times of war and uncertainty, he goes on to say that what they did was a mistake. He takes this one step further by stating that if they (that is, himself and other revolutionary members) had protested, for example, the public confession and “defrocking” in 1982 of Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who opposed the rule of jurists and who was accused of plotting to overthrow the Islamic Republic, then perhaps he and others would not stand accused of similar crimes today.

While Tajzadeh takes responsibility and publically apologizes for the “mistakes” of the 1980s, he clearly sees the reform movement as a way of correcting those mistakes, and the Green movement as a continuation in that direction. In fact, exactly like Mousavi in his Charter, Tajzadeh sees the Green movement as a continuation of the struggle that extended from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the nationalization of oil in 1951, and down to the revolution of 1979. For Tajzadeh, the reform movement was not dead but rather “awaiting completion,” just as for Khatami, Mousavi, and Mehdi Karrubi, the struggle after June 2009 was part of an effort to complete the 1979 revolution’s battle against dictatorship. Similarly, Tajzadeh sees June 2009 not as a rupture—or, as some commentators have argued, as an event similar to the 1979 revolution—but as the continuation of a prolonged fight, which over the century had taken various forms. By taking to the streets and demanding their votes, he writes, the people “not only saved our lives” but also preserved the struggles for freedom and justice of the past decade.

In fact, two tenets of the reform movement, adhered to by the Greens, support the link between the Green movement and the reform period postulated by Tajzadeh and implied by Mousavi and others: The reformists emphasized commitment to electoral, and more broadly institutional, politics as the engine of change in Iran, and to nonviolence as a form of political action. But the current Green elite’s linking of itself to the reform era’s goals and ideals also has two drawbacks. First, it can make the failures of the reform movement—especially the perception and reality of its impotence in the face of powerful opposition—its own, the Green movement, failures. In addition, it can alienate those segments of society who did not oppose the populist, socially conservative, and even hypernationalist policies of the first Ahmadinejad presidency, but joined or threw their

support to the protesting masses post-June 2009 on account of the ways in which the government conducted the election and the violence it directed toward the population in its aftermath.

In his Op-ed outlining how the Green movement is not like the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe, Fareed Zakaria notes that while the latter had three elements on their side—religion, nationalism, and democracy—the Green movement has only one, democracy.²⁶ This argument can even be extended to comparisons with the 1979 revolution—because the leaders of the Green movement do not have *any* of the elements that made the 1979 revolution possible. The current Iranian regime is not a self-referential one with a limited base, with little connection to the larger society. Furthermore, as has been noted by others, the Green movement lacks a charismatic leader like Khomeini, whose distinctive, overarching rhetoric can sustain it through ebbs and flows. Nor, it is important to note, is the current regime limited by external or internal forces in its use of violence against its opposition, as was the case with Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's state.

But in the final analysis, from the perspective of the viability of the Green movement as a force of change in Iran, there remains a silver lining. As noted earlier, the faction in power, the radical Right, is pushing the system away not only from its republican elements but from its theocratic ones as well. If this is the case, then the real push for regime change is coming precisely from those in power—who seek to change Iran from a dual system of theocracy and republicanism to one of singular authoritarianism. This opens up the Green movement to one more element of the trifecta mentioned by Zakaria: namely, religion. It also allows the leaders of the Green movement inside Iran to position themselves as advocates of stability. Whether the elite of the Green movement can see and seize upon this opportunity remains to be seen.

Endnotes

- 1 [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), “Khomeini Grandson Heckled as Khamenei Ahmadinejad Warn Reformists,” June 4, 2010.*
- 2 [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#), “Did Hassan Khomeini Punch Iran’s Interior Minister in the Nose?” June 8, 2010.*
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 [Kaveh Ehsani, Arang Keshavarzian, and Norma Claire Moruzzi](#), “Tehran, June 2009,” *Middle East Report Online*, June 28, 2009.*
- 5 English translation of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran available at: <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/government/constitution-1.html>.*
- 6 The notable exception is the first round of the 2005 presidential election that saw the surprise second place finish of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. See [Robert Rait](#), “Iran Poll Challenger Accused of Ballot Fraud,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2005.*
- 7 Shaul Bakhash, “Iran’s Remarkable Election,” *Journal of Democracy* 9: 1 (January 1998), p. 81.
- 8 At the time, while the first and third place candidates, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mehdi Karrubi respectively, raised allegations of fraud and ballot-stuffing against the Ahmadinejad campaign, their objections did not have much resonance. The possibility of fraud in 2005 has obviously gained more significance in the aftermath of the 2009 election, and in some quarters recast the entire 2005 election as the first step in a carefully planned take-over by the radical Right faction. Nonetheless at the time, Ahmadinejad’s election was seen, by analysts both inside and outside Iran, as a surprising victory of an underdog populist candidate against Rafsanjani, one of the most disliked politicians in Iran.
- 9 Thanks to Prof. Arang Keshavarzian for drawing my attention to this issue.
- 10 Masih Alinejad interview with Voice of America, *Persian broadcast*, June 7, 2010, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEAlAmg7OOM> (in Persian).*
- 11 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- 12 Significantly, the opening of the electoral space had unintended consequences for the reformists. The radical Right suffered multiple electoral defeats in the 1997 presidential, the 1998 city council, and in the 2000 parliamentary elections. Simultaneously, the population became increasingly disheartened by the pace of reforms during the Khatami era and began withdrawing from nonpresidential elections. By the 2003 city council elections, with a 12% voter turnout in Tehran, the radical Right party of Developers, or Abadgaran, got elected and chose Ahmadinejad as the mayor of Tehran.
- 13 The letter was published by the website *Parleman News* on June 8, 2010, available at: <http://www.parlemannews.ir/?n=11731> (in Persian).*
- 14 “The President’s Letter to Ayatollah Jannati,” *Tabnak*, June 7, 2010 (in Persian).*
- 15 “Mr. President, Do You Realize You Have Undermined Your Own Intentions?” *Tabnak*, June 7, 2010 (in Persian).*
- 16 “The Complaintive Response of Ayatollah Jannati to Ahmadinejad,” *Tabnak*, June 13, 2010 (in Persian).*
- 17 [Robert Tait](#), “Reformists Cling To Islamic Republic Ideal As Khamenei Sounds The Death Knell,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 10, 2010.*
- 18 [Walter Posch](#), “A Last Chance for Iran’s Reformists? The ‘Green Struggle’ Reconsidered,” *Working Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, May 2010, p. 17.*
- 19 There has been a complete lack of consensus regarding the number of people who took to the streets on June 12, 2010. Depending on the author’s political views, the number of protestors was small and insignificant, small but significant, or larger than was reported.
- 20 See Posch, “A Last Chance for Iran’s Reformists? The ‘Green Struggle’ Reconsidered,” which does a thorough job of analyzing the emergence of the movement, particularly in the context of the reform movement, and its later development.
- 21 Walter Posch notes that “the ‘Greens’ act by and large within the framework of the reformists,” citing the movement’s emphasis on “non-violence, legality, . . . legitimacy” and “democratization,” along with “the existence of countrywide party structures.” Ibid., pp. 3–4.
- 22 “Iran Document: Mousavi’s ‘Green Charter’” (*Enduring America [blog]*, June 15, 2010), available at: <http://enduringamerica.com/2010/06/16/iran-document-mousavis-green-charter-15-june/>. The original Persian is available at: <http://static3.kaleme.com/ManshoorSabz.pdf>.*
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 [Seyyed Mustafa Tajzadeh](#), “Father, Mother, We Remain Accused,” *Kalameh*, June 14, 2010 (in Persian).*
- 26 [Fareed Zakaria](#), “McCain’s Mistake: The Regime in Iran Isn’t about to Fall,” *Newsweek*, June 19, 2010.*

* Weblinks are available in the PDF version found at www.brandeis.edu/crown



Brandeis University Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

Middle East Brief

Is Nothing Sacred in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Dr. Naghmeh Sohrabi

Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown>

Kanan Makiya, "The Iraqi Elections of 2010—and 2005," June 2010, No. 42

Yezid Sayigh, " Hamas Rule in Gaza: Three Years On," March 2010, No. 41

Nader Habibi, "The Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Arab Countries: A Year-End Assessment," December 2009, No. 40

Shai Feldman and Khalil Shikaki, "The Obama Presidency and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," November 2009, No. 39

Naghmeh Sohrabi "The Curious Case of Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani," November 2009, No. 38

