

Civil society speaks; elections turning into a quiet revolution in Iran

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You, who have kept faith, uphold justice; even if it is not in your personal interest. (The holy Koran, Chapter: An-Nisa, verse: 135)

Over the past month Iran's civil society has been building up social capital in an astonishing pace and at an unprecedented scale. A peaceful revolution is in the making thanks to grass-roots networks built a decade earlier. A sea of trust is connecting the constituent elements of this revolution. And it has found voice in today's technology, the internet. The speed and accuracy of the informal, often individually-run, news broadcasting from Iran has surpassed the major news corporations, such as the BBC and the CNN.

In 1997, when the concept of civil society gained currency under the former reformist president Mohammad Khatami, only a group of elite understood the concept. The general public had little awareness of what it had already begun to build. The members of the public needed time to remake themselves as citizens. Over the past month, the Iranian citizen for the first time has become aware of its citizens' rights in a practical sense. What the first Iranian constitution stipulated more than a century ago on paper, but was stolen from the public by successive regimes, is being put into action on the streets of Tehran and other major cities as we speak.

Faced with the blatant manipulation of his/her vote by the ruling regime, the Iranian citizen has come to political scene for the first time in Iranian contemporary history to forcefully ask: "Where is my vote?", and "I want my vote back." The Iranian members of the public, frustrated by the failure of the regime to even follow its own electoral procedures, is understandably angry; but they are doing everything possible to stress the peaceful and civil nature of their protest. They are also keen to deny the regime the possibility of confiscating their newly acquired social capital in order to buy political legitimacy. The rally on 14 June, which demanded the cancellation of officially announced elections results, was unprecedented since the 1979 revolution. It attracted, according to numerous eyewitness reports, more than a million of protesters. The Iranian citizens are practically voting twice, once with the ballot paper and once with their feet.

Despite the regime's attempt to portray the high turnout in the 12 June elections as a sign of public support for the regime, the civil society has been clearly arrayed against the regime, putting the supporters of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a desperate political impasse. The resort of the regime to brutality against the protestors, who only demand a fair election, has not only deprived the regime from capitalizing on the high turnout in elections as a means to consolidate its legitimacy, it has even eroded much of the legitimacy that it had

acquired over the past 30 years. The populist appeal of the regime to street demonstrations in its own favor is in fatal jeopardy.

12 June 2009 would mark something more than another presidential election in Iran's history. It would be remembered as the day when the Iranian citizens asserted their stolen sovereignty against the totalitarian tendencies of the ruling regime. It would mark the day that the Iranian citizen came to scene of the public sphere not for the sake of an abstract religious, ethnic or nationalistic sentiment, but in defense of his/her individual right to his/her vote. 12 June 2009 would be remembered as the day when Iranians translated their natural rights into citizenship rights.

When a few days before the elections, the Political Bureau of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) warned in a statement of a 'velvet revolution' in the making, it was right on the mark. The IRGC, of course, remained true to its pledge to use force against such a revolution; but it failed in its anticipation that this revolution would be 'nipped in the bud'. Despite the overwhelming power of the IRGC and its paramilitary forces, this revolution is far more extensive and much more articulated than sporadic riots, which the IRGC is equipped to quell. Even the success of the security forces to temporarily force a recess in protests should not be taken as a permanent victory for the regime. If the ruling system is to weather this revolution short of a regime change, it needs to make fundamental changes to persuade the public to consent to its continued rule. The sources that motivate this revolution and the demands of this movement are so deep-rooted and serious that small concessions by the regime, such as a simple recount of the votes, are unlikely to appease the public.

The most important asset of a state is its legitimacy among its constituencies, or to put it more simply, the trust of the citizens in the statesmen. The estimated 84 per cent turnout in the 12 June elections could potentially provide the ruling Islamic Republic with a solid mandate. The regime could advertise this election for years as an honorable page of the history of the Islamic revolution. But the mishandling of the vote-count and the clumsy manipulation of the results turned this election into a political disaster for the regime.

Numerous eyewitness reports, and the statements issued by the two main challengers of Ahmadinejad, i.e. Mir-Hossein Musavi and Mehdi Karrubi, stress large-scale vote rigging. The electoral fraud was so blatant that even Supreme Leader's hasty intervention in endorsing the officially-announced results had almost no public impact. It not only did not convince the protestors to calm down, but even infuriated them, forcing many people to question the impartiality expected from the position of the supreme leadership. Ever since, the supporters of Musavi and Karrubi have held large peaceful mass demonstrations, undermining Ahmadinejad's claims that those disputing the elections results are only a small minority. The partial retreat of the regime before the protestors is also an indication of the real force of the dissent.

Nonetheless, the regime's small retreats could also be tactical with the view to diffuse the momentum of the protests.

Even if it can prove that the allegations of election fraud were baseless, the regime would still need to address many other serious questions in the public mind about the issues surrounding the 12 June elections. Clearly the official channels, such as the Interior Ministry, which held the elections, and the Guardian Council, which acted as the observer, have not been able to earn public trust in their impartiality in the elections. And the Judiciary is seen as too weak to address the complaints of the protestors in an efficient manner.

Many of the supporters of the Islamic regime hoped that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would intervene as a fair arbiter beyond factional politics. In fact, in such a political crisis, the Leader could be the natural figure capable of unifying the nation, if he acted as an ultimate umpire. It is still not totally clear as to why the Leader should have supported an unpopular figure like Ahmadinejad at such a high political cost to himself and such a severe toll on the national security. At any rate, the regime has a major task of rebuilding the public trust before it, and depending on to what extent it succeeds in addressing this task, the crisis could be diffused or escalated.

Faced with the fact that the views of the majority of the public is at odds with that of the rulers on the outcome of the 12 June elections, the regime may have to listen the public demands articulated by candidates such as Musavi and Karrubi, who have now emerged as opposition leaders. Any move by the Western democracies at this stage to give recognition to Ahmadinejad as Iranian president would be extremely detrimental to both the course of democracy in Iran, and the future of relations of these countries with the Iranian nation. Meanwhile, the regime is faced with two choices: brutal repression of the peaceful demands of the public for the recognition of their votes by the regime, or bowing to the opposition demand for a new ballot under the gaze of independent observers.

The regime cannot deny or ignore the fact that the movement for change is well and truly on its way in the depth of Iranian society. The will of the people to defend their votes through peaceful political rallies is an indication that the duality of the constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic should be resolved in the interest of popular sovereignty. Between the popular demand for the true sovereignty of the nation and the realization of this demand stand the powers of the Supreme Leader, supported by the coercive force of IRGC and its paramilitary adjunct, the Basij.

The populist movement, which brought Ahmadinejad to power in the 2005 election, and thus strengthened totalitarian tendencies within the regime, seems to be in disarray. The open attacks of Ahmadinejad against the powerful cleric, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who chairs the

Assembly of Experts, an assembly of the most senior Shiite clergy, is a clear indication that even the clergy would no longer serve as the power base of the supreme leadership. The power base of the leader has almost completely shifted from the traditional clerical establishment to the military and paramilitary power of the IRGC and the Basij, with a militant group of younger Islamist ideologues, including the son of the Ayatollah Khamenei pushing for total political, economic and military control. A minority of the elderly clerics (e.g. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi) have also remained loyal to the Leader.

As one pessimist observer has noted a grim analogy can be drawn between what is happening to the Islamic revolution in Iran today, on the one hand, and what occurred to the Bolshevik revolution in the Soviet Union under Stalin, on the other. Reza Taqizadeh recalls that in the early period of the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, there was a conflict between the structure of the revolutionary state and the ideological character of the state, namely the dictatorship of the proletariat. It was only 40 years after the Bolshevik revolution under Stalin that the Soviet Union found a unified identity.

According to this analysis, as a result of the presidential elections in Iran on 12 June 2009, the Islamic regime in Iran have acquired unity of identity by resolving the conflict between the constitutional structure of the Islamic state, which recognizes the vote of the people as the source of the legitimacy of political power, and the ideology of velayat faqih, which gives absolute powers to the position of supreme leader. Based on this analysis, henceforth there will be no tolerance for dissent in Iran, and this election might well be the last competitive elections in the post-revolutionary Iran. In the next stage of Iranian politics, according to this view, we will witness a purge of regime of not only the reformists, but also all those who may think differently. The Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, and his followers could be the first victims of this purge.

This is while a more optimistic view of the developments in Iran sees the 12 June elections as a window of opportunity for the emergence of a strong civil society vis-à-vis the regime. According to the political activist Akbar Ganji, with all its negative outcomes, the June 2009 elections had an unequivocally positive outcome. It proved that under the current Islamic regime, democracy would have no chance, and that only through a strong civil society would democracy be achievable. He sees the large protest rallies on street of Tehran and other Iranian cities in defense of citizenship rights as a positive outcome that will exceed demands for a mere change in election results. He suggests that the June election should be seen as a 'historical opportunity' for strengthening the civil society and democratization process in Iran.

This is the first of a series of reflections on the recent developments in Iran by researchers and practitioners linked to the Knowledge Programme on Civil Society in West Asia. This is a joint initiative by Hivos and the University of Amsterdam with the purpose of generating and integrating knowledge on

the roles and opportunities for civil society actors in democratization processes in politically challenging environments. This programme integrates academic knowledge and practitioner's knowledge from around the world to develop new insights and strategies on how civil society actors in Iran and Syria can contribute to various processes of democratization and how international actors can support this. For more information about the Knowledge Programme or specific research activities related to Iran contact Juliette Verhoeven at the University of Amsterdam j.c.verhoeven@uva.nl