



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Iran: After the Elections”

Foreign Policy Initiative Forum: Advancing and Defending Democracy
The W Hotel, 515 15th Street NW
September 22, 2009, 8:30 AM

As part of the Foreign Policy Initiative Forum on “Advancing and Defending Democracy,” **Ray Takeyh** of the Council on Foreign Relations, **Reuel Gerecht** of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and **Karim Sadjadpour** of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace discussed the repercussions of the Iranian elections on U.S. foreign policy. **Barbara Slavin** of *The Washington Times* moderated.

According to Takeyh, Iran is a country in transition. The question is how will it change and where will it go. For now, the regime has succeeded in suppressing popular unrest with only episodic surges of opposition that the security forces can quell. Therefore, the far more serious problem for the regime is the growing fragmentation amongst the elite. The regime and the opposition have effectively reached an “internal stalemate” with the regime loathe to exercise serious purges and the opposition hesitant to call for a complete overthrow of the government.

Moving forward, **President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** has two options. He could seek a foreign policy achievement abroad to compensate for his lack of legitimacy at home. If he pursues this route, Takeyh believes we will see a more accommodating Iranian foreign policy. But more likely, Ahmadinejad will attempt to externalize his internal problems by demonizing the opposition as foreign agents. In this case, the upcoming negotiations will amount to little more than a procrastination tactic.

Takeyh lamented that he foresees “no viable solutions to the Iranian conundrum.” The United States has only until spring or summer of next year before Israel will make “critical decisions” concerning Iran. Israel seems to be “quite serious” about military strikes, but the decision is not a foregone conclusion. Engagement and negotiations will not produce immediate results but are effectively an “exercise in speculation” that a multi-year process can chip away years of icy relations as Iran continues down the path of nuclear enrichment. Sanctions are unlikely to work because Russia and China will not contribute and Iran will be willing to pay the economic price for their foreign policy objectives. Finally, containment of a nuclear Iran by definition stipulates a failure to prevent proliferation.

Gerecht agreed that the **President Obama** is “in a real pickle.” While the U.S. held a certain level of optimism for negotiations, the Iranian elections decisively buried engagement. For Gerecht, engagement is “toast and was always toast.” Furthermore, Gerecht does not foresee the current administration as “becoming a great advocate of democracy in the region” because Obama would be forced to install an aggressive sanctions regime. It would be “almost impossible” to back the democratic movement in Iran. Gerecht suggested that there may be some clandestine avenues of support, but the opposition has not asked for such measures. Finally, the situation for the Iranian

regime is “not so hot anymore” as the opposition movement has greatly complicated their lives, building upon its ever-present insecurity and paranoia.

Sadjadpour focused on one fundamental question: why does Iran behave the way it does. Are they merely reacting to punitive U.S. measures or are they driven by immutable revolutionary ideology? Given the failure of U.S. engagement to elicit a change of course, Sadjadpour has now become more cynical about the Iranian regime. But at the same time, the post-election unrest has made him more optimistic about the prospects of change. So long as the regime remains in power, there will never be a nuclear accord. But the regime’s supporters have shrunk to a “cartel of nouveau-riche revolutionary guards and hard-line clerics.”

Meanwhile, the opposition has increasingly garnered support through a “decidedly deliberate approach” of building a critical mass under the tent of the Green Movement. Rather than making strident statements with a small core of dissidents, the Green Movement has strived to move all together as a group of ranging voices unified by their joint call for reform. Importantly, Sadjadpour has yet to hear the word “revolution” but instead the opposition has pushed for the disempowerment of the autocratic institutions of the Supreme Leader while empowering democratic institutions like the parliament.

Finally, the parallels between 1979 and 2009 obviously exist, but there are several differences. One, people took to the streets in greater numbers more quickly in 2009 than during the Islamic revolution. Two, **Mir-Hosein Moussavi** is not willing to send his supporters to be slaughtered for the sake of ideology as **Ruhollah Khomeini** did. And third, **Supreme Leader Khamenei** will not make the same mistake as the **Mohammad Reza Shah** by apologizing for the regime’s sins and thereby showing weakness to the public.

Responding to a question of how to support the democratic movement without undermining it, Gerecht criticized the early **Bush** administration approach of openly supporting dissidents as a “one way ticket to prison.” But the Obama administration must get its rhetoric “straight” and state clearly the necessity of honest elections and liberal principles. While it is not the up to the U.S. to “play big brother,” it must show consistent support for democracy in Iran.

When asked about the significance of growing fissures within the clerical class, Sadjadpour suggested they are significant but not fatal for Khamenei. The Supreme Leader encompasses much more than a clerical leader. He also is the leader of the military establishment. Therefore a truly damaging blow would be a rupture within the state security apparatus. All the leaders of the Revolutionary Guards are appointed directly by the Supreme Leader, but the rank and file are a different matter. Considering approximately half of them voted for Moussavi, it is unlikely they will be willing to continue a harsh crackdown. Gerecht added that Khamenei seeks to avoid huge collisions with the opposition that would result in too much blood spilt, as this might exacerbate any existing fractures within the Revolutionary Guard. After all, a minority of Guardsmen are die-hard believers while most joined to gain the perks of the corrupt corps.