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George Washington University
“Iran’s Presidential Election”

The Elliot School for International Affairs, April 29, 2009, 6:30 pm

The Middle East Policy Forum at the Institute for Middle East Studies hosted a panel discussion on Iran’s upcoming presidential election. As June’s election is fast approaching many are working to make sense of a process that is highly unpredictable and often misunderstood. Engaging in the debate were **Paola Rivetti**, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Siena, Italy; **Mohammad Tabaar**, Lecturer in International Affairs at GW, reporter for the BBC, and Ph.D. candidate at Georgetown; **Naghmeh Sohrabi**, Assistant Director for Research at the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University; and was moderated by **Robin Wright**, award-winning journalist and author of several books on the Middle East and Iran.

The panelists addressed the issues facing Iran’s new president, namely the economy and the country’s status as a regional and international player. In 2005, **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** campaigned on a platform of economic reform, claiming he would bring the country’s oil revenues to peoples’ dinner tables. As this has not occurred and the economic situation is even worse today, **Ahmadinejad’s opponents are accusing him of squandering \$270 billion in oil revenue**. Also, as Iran’s budget is based on \$90 per barrel oil prices it is unable to sustain itself while prices are nearly half that. **Paola Rivetti** pointed out that **the reelection of President Ahmadinejad is far from certain**, especially since the conservatives are not expressing their universal support. And while Khomeini has publicly backed Ahmadinejad, the panelists pointed out that in recent years the Supreme Leader’s endorsement is often the kiss of death. In addition, **Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi are speaking out against Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy and erratic, incendiary rhetoric**. For instance, Karroubi has argued that the president’s stance on the Holocaust and his speeches about Israel are actually harming the cause of the Palestinians, not helping. But **Mohammad Tabaar** explained that as oil prices are decreasing and so is anti-American sentiment, Ahmadinejad appears to be coming around to the idea that he will have to address these issues more constructively.

Explaining that Iran’s elections are free but not fair, **Naghmeh Sohrabi** questioned, “do these elections matter?” If nothing else, **they do provide a picture of democratic evolution in Iran – demonstrating a clear learning curve from the first election that took place nearly 30 years ago**. For example, the 1997 election of Khatami saw an unprecedented number of voters turning out to participate and Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 placed the rural vote on the map. However, a recent debate has arisen over the relative “health” of the election process as many fear vote-rigging is becoming more of a problem. Sohrabi explained that the Ministry of the Interior (generally staffed by hardliners) supervises the elections, counting the votes by hand and tallying them by computer – making rigging quite easy. Additionally, in a speech given to election supervisors, the head of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Jannati blatantly proclaimed

that of all the presidential candidates Ahmadinejad was the best choice. In light of these problems, some reformists are proposing the creation of an independent Committee for the Protection of Votes to supervise the elections. **Regardless of whether vote-rigging will occur en masse, Sohrabi argued that these types of debates and concerns show that the elections are becoming more competitive.**

As one of the few certainties of Iranian elections is their eleventh hour uncertainty, all of the panelists declined from making a prediction on the electoral outcome. But each panelist did offer unique insight into the process and personalities involved, demonstrating a vibrant and dynamic, if not always fair system by which Iranians choose their president.