

Blogging Iran's election

By Solana Larsen,
Created 2005-06-16 23:00

The polls open today, 17 June, in one of the most closely observed presidential elections in Iranian history. There have been [protests](#) [1], [arrests](#) [2] and even a few [bomb blasts](#) [3] during the campaign, but the election is also marked by a greater flow of information than ever before – propelled by thousands of weblogs, websites and newspapers.

Our own Iranian election weblog on **openDemocracy**, [Iran Scan 1384](#) [4], has been buzzing out observations continuously over the past month. Recapping a few of the events that have caused a stir on the internet provides an easy way into understanding some of the key issues of this election.

It's more fun if you click on the links!

Campaign methods

Iran is a young country. After nearly a million lives were lost in the 1980-88 war with Iraq, Iranian mullahs created [financial incentives](#) [5] for women bearing more children. Now, more than half of the population is under the age of 25. This has affected the politics of the country enormously.

It is not, as you might imagine, that Iranian young people are hot for politics across the country. This “third generation” (as Mohsen Sazegara calls them in his **openDemocracy** [article](#) [5] “Iran’s road to democracy”) is more accurately portrayed as politically apathetic.

In fact, the interesting effect of both their youth and their apathy is that the presidential candidates (let’s call them old men) have been bending over backwards to vie for young people’s attention and gain their trust. Young people in Iran, as [Kaveh Basmenji](#) [6] vividly describes in **openDemocracy’s** excerpt from his forthcoming book *Tehran Blues: Youth Culture in Iran*, have plenty of other things on their mind.

Also in openDemocracy’s debate on Iran’s [elections, politics and democracy](#) [6]:

[IranScan](#) [7] – a lively multi-authored **openDemocracy** blog by Iranians from Tehran to Los Angeles

Hossein Derakhshan & Solana Larsen, “Blogging Iran’s wired election” ([June 2005](#) [7])

If you find this material valuable please consider supporting **openDemocracy by sending us a [donation](#) [7] so that we can continue our work and keep it free for all**

This is the first election where all the candidates have their own websites, and even in one case (Mostafa Moin) a personally authored [weblog](#) [8]. Former chief of police and presidential hopeful Mohammad Baqer-Qalibaf trimmed his beard and donned new glasses. Former president and

conservative [Hashemi Rafsanjani](#) [9] appeared on TV with young men and women in western clothing, and rebranded himself as *HASHEMI*. His campaign reportedly [paid](#) [10] people to drive around with his bumper stickers on their cars. As [Nasrin Alavi](#) [11] notes in Iran Scan 1384 many of the kids promoting his candidacy would have been arrested during his former presidency for wearing the [clothing](#) [12] they now display.

Sean Penn in Iran

Before the Iraq war, American actor [Sean Penn](#) [13] twice plonked himself down in Iraq to try to dissuade the invasion. He wrote a report for the *San Francisco Chronicle* on both his visits. Now in Iran, he is performing a kind of [repeat act](#) [14], entering the country as a “journalist” for the same newspaper. Insignificant celebrity media ploy? Think again. It has caused a huge furore.

Penn hasn't actually reported anything yet. But the fact that he is closely affiliated with [Global Exchange](#) [15], a fiercely anti-Bush organisation, led many Iranian activists to angrily interpret his visit as support for the ruling mullahs. [Afshin Molavi](#) [16] explains this very well.

“Progressives in America consistently fail to side with the forces for democracy in Iran because it might just seem too, well, Wolfowitzian or, worse, Rumsfeldian,” he writes in Iran Scan 1384.

The relationship between the American Left and Iranian pro-democracy movements is explored from three different angles [here](#) [16].

To vote or not

The most crucial debate throughout the campaign has been on the question of whether to vote or not. The country's democracy advocates are not fearful of voting, but they are concerned with how their vote will be interpreted. A thousand people [registered](#) [17] to become candidates in the presidential election. From this list, only [8 men](#) [18] (89 female hopefuls were rejected) were selected by the [Guardian Council](#) [19], a body of hand-picked Islamic clerics and lawyers with veto power over the parliament, to actually run for office.

Initially, there were no reformists, the strongest advocates of democracy and civil rights, among the chosen candidates. After a bout of civil outrage the [Supreme Leader](#) [20], Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#) [21], decreed that two reformist candidates should also be selected as candidates. Instead of celebrating, reformist supporters felt [caught](#) [22] in a trap.

Reformists are fierce opponents of “the sovereign's decree” and many supporters encouraged favourite candidate Mostafa Moin *not* to accept a candidature because it would be “hypocritical”. After a tactical pause for consideration, Moin decided to run, and made headlines across the world. Since then he has been a frontrunner, along with Rafsanjani and Baqer-Qalibaf.

So should reformists vote? Current president Mohammad Khatami was a reformist too when he was elected by a landslide for the first time in 1997. Since then, the parliament has unanimously [passed](#) [23] more than 100 progressive laws, including a ban on torture and bill on freedom of the press. Unfortunately, the Guardian Council has vetoed them. There is little hope that a newly elected Moin would be able to make good his promises for reform. There is a [strong argument](#) [24] for boycott on these grounds, one that has increasingly gained popularity among the Iranian intelligentsia. None wish to be seen by the world as endorsing the current political system.

Also in openDemocracy, [Mehrdad Mashayekhi](#) [24] analyses the new paradigm in Iranian democracy movements: “an epoch-making renaissance” in political culture and discourse

In the event of a boycott, Rafsanjani is seen as the most likely winner. But western elite observers who see him as their best hope for ending the nuclear standoff [24] seem conveniently to have forgotten the human rights abuses [25] under his rule and his implication [26] in terrorist acts.

Blocking a Rafsanjani victory is one of the motives pro-vote bloggers have been citing in order to explain their decision to participate. Until the day before the election, Iran Scan 1384 blogger "Mr. Behi" was fully convinced he would boycott. Yesterday he posted the following on his own blog, Adventures of Mr. Behi [27]:

"I cannot stand on this nightmare of seeing him as a president for four years. And if Moeen wins? We shall see how he can keep his promise but he is by far very different from other candidates and is best fit for my ideas and I see him honest."

This is about as hopeful as it gets. As Hossein Derakhshan [28] writes in Iran Scan 1384, Moin may be a good guy, but he is a terrible speaker and not very charismatic. "But who cares? Nobody is actually going to vote for Moin for himself." Derakhshan pegs his hopes on the entire team that backs Moin, arguing that is where he earns whatever credibility he has.

The election today is likely to move into a second round, since the race is close and the winner needs to gain at least a 50% majority. As the results begin to flow in, I think it's safe to say that the atmosphere is neither optimistic nor promising [29]. In democratic terms the election's only success belongs to the many political and cultural victories the pro-democracy movement has gained in the campaign.

Iran Scan 1384 will continue to watch closely.

Iran Scan 1384

<http://www.iranscan.net/> [30]

Global Voices - Blog Roundup

<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/?p=237> [31]

The Cheat Sheet: The Iranian Election

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2864 [32]

Free Thoughts

<http://freethoughts.org/> [33]

Hoder.com

<http://www.hoder.com> [34]

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/blog_2609.jsp

Links:

[1] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/photos_from_the_women_s target=_blank

[2] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/more_protests_in_iran target=_blank

[3] http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/06/bomb_in_ahwaz.html target=_blank

[4] <http://www.iranscan.net> target=_blank

- [5] <http://www.vanityfair.com/commentary/content/printables/050613roco03?print=true> target=_blank
- [6] <http://www.signaturebooks.co.uk/cgi-bin/ai.cgi?ISBN=0863565824> target=_blank
- [7] <http://www.iranscan.net/page/Iran/> target=_blank
- [8] <http://drmoeen.ir/> target=_blank
- [9] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/youth_vote target=_blank
- [10] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/opinion_unreliable_polls target=_blank
- [11] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/mao_suits_to_fade_away target=_blank
- [12] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/promoting_rafsanjani target=_blank
- [13] <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000576/> target=_blank
- [14] <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2005/06/14/entertainment/e130015D59.DTL&hw=sean+penn&sn=001&sc=1000> target=_blank
- [15] <http://www.globalexchange.org/> target=_blank
- [16] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/sean_penn_in_iran target=_blank
- [17] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/who_are_the_candidates target=_blank
- [18] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/who_are_the_candidates target=_blank
- [19] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Guardians target=_blank
- [20] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Leader target=_blank
- [21] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/reformists_and_the_sovereign_s target=_blank
- [22] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/heated_discussion_moin_should_stay target=_blank
- [23] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/mao_suits_to_fade_away target=_blank
- [24] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/opinion_boycott_starting_to_use target=_blank
- [25] http://hrw.org/doc/?t=mideast_pub&c=iran target=_blank
- [26] <http://www.c-d-i.org/Spotlight/moderate.htm> target=_blank
- [27] http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2005/06/election_eve.html target=_blank
- [28] http://iranscan.net/comments/Iran/Weblog/two_main_boycott_supporters_turn target=_blank
- [29] http://www.opendemocracy.net/blogs/comments/Iran/Weblog/khatami_and_freedom_of_the
- [30] <http://www.iranscan.net/>
- [31] <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/globalvoices/?p=237>
- [32] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2864
- [33] <http://freethoughts.org/>
- [34] <http://www.hoder.com>



This article is published by Solana Larsen, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.