

Iran's new era: nine lessons for reformers

By Emadeddin Baghi,
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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's assumption of Iran's presidency today [1], 3 August 2005, represents a political defeat with huge costs. Yet it also presents an opening to explore new perspectives on some of the key issues facing Iran today.

Over the last two years I have given a lot of thought [2] to three issues: how to prevent a rollback of the democratic inroads we have made in Iran; the balancing act between human rights and democracy; and the estrangement of Iranian intellectuals from Iranian society.

The world beyond Tehran

Both before and after the 1979 revolution [3] the Iranian state has pursued policies that have created massively uneven development in the country's urban centres. These are vividly apparent in the capital, Tehran, where modern buildings and lavish homes in the wealthy Gheytarieh area abut teeming, narrow alleys where the city's poor survive: a juxtaposition to which casual passers-by are often oblivious.

Emadeddin Baghi

Emadeddin Baghi is one of Iran's leading dissident intellectuals. He is the author of twenty books (six of which have been banned) and has been an editor and writer for myriad reform publications, most of which have been shut down.

In his book *The Tragedy of Democracy in Iran* (1998), he accused top government officials of complicity in the assassination of political dissidents. In 2000 he was sentenced to seven years in prison (reduced to three years on appeal) for "insulting sanctities", "undermining national security", and "putting out false news".

In 2004 Emadeddin Baghi was awarded the Civil Courage Prize [4], but was, at the final hour, prohibited from leaving Iran to accept [5] it. He remains in Iran today, with the threat of re-imprisonment [6] constantly hanging over his head. His website is at www.emadbaghi.com/en [7].

This landscape frames a key debate over the role of intellectuals and reformist thinkers in Iran today. The centralising thinking of many intellectuals prevents them seeing that Tehran is not a reflection of Iran as a whole, and registering the reality of Iran's faultlines and social divides [8].

Khak-e Sefeed, a settlement of around 45,000 people on the outskirts of Tehran, is a good illustration of this myopia. It is a place full of illegal activity, including prostitution, smuggling, drug addiction and sex trafficking. In 2001 the police surrounded the area and arrested most of its inhabitants. Until then, no one in Tehran, a city full of journalists and intellectuals, seemed to care about it or even be aware of its existence.

Beyond such inequalities, there are many larger areas of deprivation in Iran: in rural areas, in poor border regions, in provinces [9] like Kurdistan and Baluchistan. If intellectuals who talk about the rights of women and in support of democracy were to venture to such places, they would likely be met with a flood of complaints from ordinary people whose rights have been violated.

These social divides are reflected in different strands of religious thinking. Some religious intellectuals in Tehran have been debating the status of the “twelfth *imam*” of *Shi’a* Islam [10] – a sinless, infallible figure in the *Shi’a* panoply whom Iran’s *Shi’a* believe has been missing for 1,200 years, but who will reappear at the end of time to establish a reign of justice on earth. Alongside this debate – and totally oblivious of it – 3-4 million Iranian pilgrims have visited the Jamkaran [11] mosque after an obscure cleric dreamed that the “twelfth imam” had once graced it with his presence.

These examples suggest that intellectuals and common people inhabit parallel universes, reflected in a major chasm in their respective beliefs, practices, and languages. Intellectuals who should be providing guidance to society and solving social problems [12] have, in their illusions and confusions, become part of the problem themselves. Instead, they hurry to push their ideas beyond the capacity of society to absorb them.

Iran after Ahmadinejad

In this situation, and in light of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s confirmation [13] as Iran’s new president, what can Iranian intellectuals now do?

The first responsibility when faced with unexpected events is not to misinterpret their meaning. Iran’s intellectuals and reformers have not just suffered consecutive electoral defeats in recent years (in city council, parliamentary, press regulation and presidential elections), they have consistently reacted to these events by blaming outside factors rather than engaging in critical introspection.

In the June presidential election [14], three broad groups participated: conservatives and proponents of the status quo; reformists who opposed the status quo; and an opposition coalition that called for a boycott. Some reformists are attempting to analyse their shortcomings more critically and clearly, but others either attribute their defeat to breaches of the electoral laws or celebrate the popular support one of their candidates managed to generate. Both reactions evade more profound and important political realities.

Meanwhile, the pro-boycott group have propounded the claim that because voter turnout was 60%, then 40% of the population must be in their camp. This analysis is premised on the faulty assumption that a “normal” electoral turnout is 100%, and that all those who do not vote act from predetermined political conviction. This is self-deceiving; in most of the world’s democratic societies, 30-35% of people – for various reasons, many of which have little to do with politics – don’t participate in elections.

There are exceptions to this general rule, as in Iran during the revolutionary period (the 1979 referendum over an Islamic republic) or when a popular movement arises (the 1997 reformist wave that brought Mohammad Khatami [15] to power). But the “real” boycott figure should be calculated by assuming a “normal” turnout of around 65%.

With this in mind, Iranian intellectuals and reformists must learn nine lessons from recent defeats:

- there is a significant chasm separating the people from the reformists and intellectuals
- intellectuals and reformists assume that the “silent majority” belong to one group that are collectively dissatisfied with the status quo for all the same reasons, when in reality there are some who have access to the media and can express opinions; and this “silent majority” contains many poor and deprived people whose voice is only heard and paid attention to when there is an election
- people are interested in change and improvement but they do not support radical, extremist or reactionary policies
- everywhere in the world, people turn to the pursuit of human rights and democracy after the basic necessities of life have been provided. But for the majority of people in Iran today, putting food on the table takes priority over democracy and freedom of speech; only after these basic requirements have been taken care of will people have the luxury of pursuing the struggle for freedom and democracy
- more than half of the population do not support a dismantling of the Islamic Republic of Iran – but they do favour reforming the system
- sensationalised media reporting does not change reality; unless there is a fertile soil that can accommodate political change within society, propaganda will not have any effect
- the pursuit of human rights should have priority over democratisation
- civil society in Iran is still very weak; intellectuals should engage with society and not allow their credibility to be weakened by channelling all their efforts into political quarrels with the regime
- intellectuals and reformists, notwithstanding their conflict with the regime, should always be working for the best interests of the majority; likewise, the regime should take steps to remove obstacles and various constraints that have been placed on this social group

If intellectuals and reformist learn these truths, they can help create a better future for Iran and its people in the coming years.

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This article was translated by Nader Hashemi

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