

Inside Iran

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Headlines scream of a global crisis and a new era where cold-war rivalry is replaced by the clash of civilisations. Protests against the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed rage across the Muslim world. News items link speculations about Iran's attempts to build a nuclear arsenal [1] with pictures of vicious demonstrators throwing petrol-bombs and stones at the Danish embassy.

Ordinary Iranian Muslims may well be dismayed by images they view as racist [2]. But the 12 million citizens of their capital, Tehran, are far from alight with rage. Most do not support violent attacks on European diplomatic missions and have stayed away from the demonstrations. Iranians in any case have no real freedom of assembly; only a week earlier, hundreds of Tehran bus workers were imprisoned [3] in an effort to crush their strike. So an attack by a 400-strong crowd whose members injure police officers [4] and burn a car at the embassy compound cannot be seen as a spontaneous protest, but is rather a foreign-policy directive from a faction trying to isolate Iran internationally for its own ends.

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Also by Nasrin Alavi on **openDemocracy**:

"Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's fear" (November 2005 [6])

The weakness of power

When Mohammad Khatami was in office (1997-2005), western political commentators often highlighted the toothless nature of Iran's presidency. But Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [7]'s election in June 2005 saw him quickly elevated to the position of the west's "worst nightmare" and a central factor in the new Iranian political equation. Ahmadinejad's provocative speeches against Israel [7], and video recordings where he talks of being surrounded by a divine light as he addressed the United Nations assembly, have sent jitters across the world; but his apocalyptic visions have proved even more controversial in Iran itself.

According to *Shi'a* Islamic belief a *Mahdi* (messiah) will appear alongside Moses, Jesus and Mohammed on judgment day. Yet *Shi'a* scriptures also abound with condemnations of any prediction by mere mortals of the *Mahdi's* arrival. The former parliamentary speaker and cleric, Mehdi Karroubi, fiercely attacked the new government's profane references to the *Mahdi* in an interview with the reformist *Sharg* newspaper (7 January 2006 [8]); he even threw doubts at the revolutionary credentials of the president's spiritual leader and mentor Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi [9]: "In the first ten years of the revolution Mesbah was not known...wherever he was, I don't know. If anyone knows they should tell us".

Karroubi recounted a story from the 1960s, when Mesbah-Yazdi chastised (the future president) Hashemi Rafsanjani for the latter's fight against the monarchy, saying that he "totally disregards" such a struggle as a "meaningless" effort.

Bootleg tapes of Ahmadinejad's mystical belief in his own mission are available in Iran and can be viewed on the web; yet the risks of adverse public opinion and an outcry from the seminaries led government spokesman [Gholamhossein Elham](#) [10] to damn the tapes as forgeries made to discredit the president. Even the fervent Ahmadinejad and his backers realise that Iran is not a Saddamite society where a political leader can enforce his delusions on the population. Yet the west must also realise that for such individuals, Condoleezza Rice's offering of "creative chaos" is a perfect backdrop – for it reinforces their view that the return of the awaited *Mahdi* is indeed imminent.

Iran's exposure to the strictures of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and [reporting](#) [11] of its nuclear activities to the United Nations Security Council means that there is growing and open criticism of the new government's strategies within Iran. The Participation Front, Iran's main reformist party that had led the government during the Khatami era, has criticised "the foreign policy of the present government that has caused renewed tension, conflict, lack of confidence and the decline in Iran's status and standing in the international arena".

Iran's former nuclear chief [Hassan Rowhani](#) [12] (closely linked to the Rafsanjani power-bloc) warned on 9 February that: "We should avail ourselves of all national means for not getting isolated; we cannot just reach our aims by shouting slogans and adopting one sole simple strategy".

With rising outside pressure such tacit squabbles are becoming increasingly visible. On 12 February, foreign-ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi [reaffirmed](#) [13] Iran's commitment to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty - only a day after Ahmadinejad had said that Iran could abandon it.

This [spectrum](#) [14] of views is a small signal of a complex internal situation: although many ordinary Iranians may logically believe that acquiring nuclear energy is in their long-term economic and growth national interests, the resumption of its nuclear research programme has thrown Iran into an open clash with the international community, initiating fears that the issue could spiral into [armed conflict](#) [14].

Ahmadinejad is increasingly viewed as an extremist loose cannon. Yet there are others near the apex of Iranian power, pragmatists who may be willing to back down on the nuclear question to help save the economy. In fact the president has less power than any of his Islamic Republic predecessors. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, has seemingly been startled enough by Ahmadinejad's disruptive tendencies to grant the [expediency council](#) [15] (a non-elected body headed by Rafsanjani) oversight of the presidency.

This weakness goes back to Ahmadinejad's election victory in June 2005, when accusations of vote-rigging were made by three of his rival candidates (among the seven allowed to compete for the office, from the 1,010 who registered in the attempt) as well as many other observers. The candidates who alleged [foul play](#) [16] - Mehdi Karroubi (onetime speaker of parliament), Mostafa Moin (ex-education minister), and Hashemi Rafsanjani, (ex-president) – each represent factional power-blocs within Iran, and have continued to chide Ahmadinejad since his power was confirmed.

Ahmadinejad's struggles to install an oil minister after a three-month political deadlock further exposed his political frailty, and the divisions among Iran's conservatives. After three failed

attempts, he was finally forced into a major compromise by proposing an acceptable candidate for the post – one who had backed a political rival during the presidential elections.

Among the president's critics, the "dealmaker" Rafsanjani may yet be a significant figure. Ahmadinejad's pledge to redistribute wealth and thwart the "mafia" that dominates the oil industry is a visible attack on this key regime figure; in a brewing internal feud, Rafsanjani has openly warned against the detrimental effects of the sweeping purge of regime officials by the new government – including its sacking of many senior diplomats – as well as its inflationary budget policies.

Ahmadinejad's radical policies jeopardise the vested interests of the Iranian business class whom Rafsanjani represents. The unelected clerics who control the unaccountable institutions of the state resist pressure from business and political reformists alike. But internal rivalry between the right and the extreme right offers a great opportunity for reformists to regroup. Today an opening for sustainable reform is reliant on confronting once and for all the shadowy Iranian neo-conservatives that have come to the fore to make a last desperate stab [16] for revolutionary resurgence.

Also in openDemocracy on the internal politics and external relationships of [Iran](#) [17], and the prospects for democracy in the country:

Ardashir Tehrani, "[Iran's presidential coup](#) [17]" (June 2005)

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Another Iran

But there is also another Iran simmering behind the power struggles and the angry headlines. Ahmadinejad continually talks of the good old glory days of the [Iran-Iraq war \(1980-88\)](#) [19] and of a "new Islamic revolution" at a time when even most of his contemporaries appear to have moved on.

[Ebrahim Hatamikia](#) [20] became an Iranian household name during the same war. He mastered his craft with films and documentaries from the front line of the battlefields that inspired national pride and morale. Yet this year he gave the audience an anti-war film. In Iran's equivalent of the Oscars (Fajr film festival) *In the name of the father* was [awarded](#) [21] five Crystal Phoenix's, which included the jury and the people's choice award.

His film tells the story of a soldier who lays landmines in a warzone to keep out Saddam's invading armies. Years later the same mines injure his beloved daughter. Hatamikia's film may seem overly theatrical and melodramatic to some. But for Iranians it is all part of a very recent

reality. The Iran-Iraq war led to the destruction of a whole generation. It was fought in the trenches, first-world-war style. The roads, streets and narrow alleyways of Iran have been renamed after the hundreds and thousands of dead that the locals of these neighbourhoods still vividly and fondly remember as young boys. It's hard to believe that Iran's people share Ahmadinejad's open nostalgia for the war years.

During the "glory days" of 1979, Ahmadinejad became a member of *Tahkim Vahdat* [22], strutting his revolutionary stuff around campus. Iran's largest national student union was formed after a decree by Ayatollah Khomeini urging the expulsion of liberal and leftwing student groups from campuses. But things have moved on: a quarter of a century later, *Tahkim Vahdat* became one of the most vocal critics [23] of the regime.

It is no secret that most of the rulers in the middle east are out of synch with their youth, and Iran is no exception. But while many Arab countries are ruled by authoritarian leaders who are nonetheless more liberal than many of their citizens, people in Iran have already experienced the fullness of a radical regime.

Ali Reza Alavitar [24] has said of Iran's new generation that "they deny all the previous generations; as if they are the first intelligent generation in recent Iranian history". Publisher of several influential newspapers that were shut down in recent years, Alavitar's own generation was caught up in an era of conflict and he had volunteered for the front at the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war.

In the aftermath of that war a baby boom was encouraged. According to Ayatollah Khomeini a country whose youth were ready for martyrdom "could never be destroyed". But although the population has indeed more than doubled since the 1979 revolution, to almost 70 million [25], the master-plan has not come to pass.

Today groups of young people who aspire to a more western lifestyle have even turned events like St Valentine's Day into a local festival. In 2005, Iran's former deputy-president Ali Abtahi, a *Shi'a* cleric, greeted the new cause for celebration for young lovers in Islamic Iran in his blog [25] by writing that although there are many irritated by all this: "We cannot deny the reality. And anyway the Islam that I know encourages life and love."

A fracturing elite

Yet the flustered deluge of media reports seemingly asks us to believe, that with the election of Ahmadinejad even the demographics of Iran have changed. Iranians are routinely portrayed on news broadcasts as crowds chanting "Death to America and Israel!" in archive footage shot during Friday prayers. Yet according to surveys by Iran's own ministry of culture and guidance, fewer than 1.4% of the population actually bothers to attend Friday prayers.

Iran is also perhaps one of the few countries in the middle east where people don't attribute their hardships to their undemocratic United States-backed rulers. A major national poll in 2002 [26] commissioned by the then-reformist parliament revealed that 64.5% favoured resumption of talks between Iran and the United States. Three separate Iranian institutes – including the National Institute for Research Studies and Opinion Polls (Nirsop) were closed down and the researchers involved soon found themselves in prison [27]. Three years later Abdollah Naseri, the former director of the state news agency, Irna, was put on trial for revealing that the regime's *raison d'être*, enmity to the US, is not shared by the majority of Iranians.

Those who took part in that survey seemingly believe in Iran's integration in a global economy that can offer jobs and prosperity. Equally, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's electoral draw was based

on promises of a better economic future. He had tapped into the vein of popular anger against corruption and cronyism; appealing to the minds and hearts of jobless youth and underpaid workers promising food and housing subsidies for the poor.

Only months after his election, the populist powers of the man who famously donned street sweeper's uniform in camaraderie with the workers are in danger of eroding away as union workers get arrested [28], basic groceries and metro prices go up and the much-publicised government loans for newlyweds [29] are as good as abandoned.

With his pledge to fight corruption he has also opened an unsavoury can of worms. Spurred on by Ahmadinejad, parliamentary debates have been increasingly filled with accusations and counter accusations of corruption; as the public listen to mudslinging matches broadcast live on state radio, the whole system including the cronies of the new president appears implicated. Ahmadinejad's defiant isolationist policies will ultimately undermine his electoral promises with an inevitable fall in living standards; yet the increasing tensions with the west are also likely to screen him from scrutiny.

An incident on 10 October 2005 illuminates the other realities of contemporary Iran. Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani [30] was invited by Tehran's Sharif University's student *basij* group. The audience was composed mainly of *basij* members. But a small group of Tahkim Vahdat students had gained access to the hall. They sat in the front row and as Larijani started to speak, three members of this group rose their placards that read: "We Want Bread, We don't want Uranium"; and, in typically Persian sarcastic jibes at Iran's unity with Venezuela: "If only the whole world was made up of Venezuelans" and "Hugo Chavez we love the way you say death to America".

openDemocracy's global security correspondent Paul Rogers writes a weekly column tracking developments in the "war on terror". Among his reports on Iran's security policy and the possibility of an extension of the war to Tehran:

"Confident Iran [30]"
(March 2005)

"America's Iranian predicament [30]"
(August 2005)

"The Iran nuclear chess-game [30]" (September 2005)

"Iran in Israel's firing-range [30]"
(December 2005)

"The United States, nuclear weapons, and Iran [30]" (January 2006)

Paul Rogers has also written a report for the Oxford Research Group on the likely effects of a military attack against Iran's nuclear facilities, including the prospect of heavy civilian casualties:

"Iran: Consequences of a War [31]" (February 2006)

Half an hour into his speech Larijani looked at them and said: "I've read your placards, why don't you put them down" The whole auditorium clapped in support of Larijani. Yet Larijani who had come to preach to the choir was confronted with a grilling at the end of his speech.

The first person at the podium asked: "what happens if the west doesn't back down and we have a war. Who will be answerable to the misery awaiting this Nation?" The second person criticised the lack of experience and the credentials of the nuclear negotiation team. While a third asked, "why do you insist on calling this a national case? On what basis do you say that you have the backing of 70 million people?" After offering assurances that military conflict was out of the question Larijani left the meeting an hour earlier than scheduled at three.

Confronting Larijani were young idealists who have taken the egalitarian rhetoric of the Iranian revolution and interpreted it literally. These youth are perhaps the greatest challenge to Ahmadinejad as they are part of a new generation of Iranians fonder of the truth than martyrdom. They see themselves as citizens with rights, holding the new government to their word; a fact that even Larijani and Iran's conservative leaders are mindful of.

The next Iran

Wary of negative public opinion after Iran's reporting to the UN Security Council on 4 February [32], a directive was sent out by the national security council to Iran's journalists and media forbidding, negative reporting of the country's diplomatic efforts. The directive stressed against rousing alarm, or even insinuations that diplomatic efforts had reached a stalemate.

Those who lived through the Iranian revolution of 1979 are now a minority. Iran has one of the most youthful and educated populations in the middle east. Her younger generation has been completely transformed through the Islamic Republic's education policies of free education and national literacy campaigns. 70% are under 30 years old, with literacy rates of well over 90%, even in rural areas. Notably, in 2005, more than 65% of those entering university were women. It is this generation, the "we are Iran" generation [33] that will ultimately determine the future of Iran.

What is happening in Iran is more significant and more sustainable in the long run than the mere overthrow of dictators; that as we are witnessing in Iraq is the easy part. A generational change ecologically threatens the survival of radicals. Yet while the gap between the rulers and the ruled widens, fanatics have raised the volume of their hardline rhetoric, desperately trying to reassert Iran's radical credentials.

Today a frenzied western media, through a prism of fear and stereotype, has further empowered the likes of Ahmadinejad as the true face of Iran in a confrontation in which Islam is seen to be pitched against the west. Yet the west must realise that radical Iran survives in isolation and conflict. As Ahmadinejad appears to be doing his best to provoke the west, a clash of civilisations is not yet inevitable - but pick up his gauntlet and it's a pretty good start.

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[7] <http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2605's>

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