

Iran's Peculiar Election

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In the present age of democracy, ideas about the “social contract” and the natural rights of citizens have become, much to the consternation of despots, indispensable elements of the common political discourse. Autocrats of different hue and heft—from totalitarian tyrants like Stalin to authoritarian despots like the shah—must pay lip service to the idea of popular elections, incorporating it into their countries’ political practices. Employing a combination of force and chicanery, money and muscle, they deform elections into an empty but expedient gesture of public diplomacy, intended largely for consumption abroad, and not for registering and implementing what Rousseau called “the general will.” In nondemocratic countries, elections become an instrument for validating the self-serving political designs of the despotic elite. The tortured political history of the twentieth century has shown that elections, rather than being a guarantor of democracy, are merely a necessary tool for democracy—and then only if they are genuinely free and fair.¹

Modern Iranian politics provides a good, albeit painful, example of the strange vicissitudes of elections as both an idea and a political practice. The country has witnessed three types of elections, each representing a distinct political philosophy and meant to underlie a different form of governance. Based on the Iranian experience, one can even extrapolate the general proposition that the relative quality of elections in any country is a reliable reflection and a fair measure of the true nature of power in that society. There have been times when the country has experimented with limited but still recognizable forms of liberal democracy: from 1905 to 1907, and again from 1941 to 1953. In such

times, elections were as free as the context of an underdeveloped society—with its high illiteracy, weak sense of civic responsibility, and easily corruptible officials—could allow. At other times, Iranians have experienced periods of modernizing authoritarianism. Such periods covered nearly all of the Pahlavi era (1925–41 and 1953–79), when Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Shah believed that only with an iron grip could they pull Iran out of the vicious cycle of backwardness and poverty. The prospect of democracy and free elections, they believed, had to be sacrificed in the name of economic progress.

Most recently, in the years of the Islamic Republic, Iran has been ruled by a would-be totalitarian regime, bent as much on “soulcraft” as “statecraft,”² and keen on remolding society and the citizenry around Islamic values. In Iran, as in other regimes aspiring to totalitarianism, elections are a necessary nuisance; they are the key element of the regime’s democratic façade and a convenient tool for hiding its despotic soul. As Hannah Arendt has shown, totalitarianism, the most pernicious form of dictatorship, is ironically possible only in the age of democracy.³ The Islamic regime has failed to establish a tight totalitarian hold on power not for lack of trying, but because various strata of Iranian society, particularly women and students, have fought vigorously to thwart the regime’s attempts to deprive them of their rights.

As a political system, the Islamic Republic has from its inception been *sui generis*. It has uniquely tried to combine, in the constitution itself, the vast despotic powers of an unelected “supreme leader” with the limited democratic promise of a popularly elected president and parliament.⁴ In the last few years, local councils too have been elected by the direct vote of the people. The Islamic Republic’s holding of regular elections sets it apart from many Middle Eastern Muslim countries, and the regime’s defenders often see this as one of its important achievements. The regime’s critics, however, fault the same regular elections for their undemocratic nature and for their failure seriously to change the structure of power in Iran.

Behind the 2005 Election

Even in the context of Iran’s contested electoral history, the June 2005 presidential ballot stands out. Some have already dubbed it the “Third Revolution,” after the 1979 Islamic Revolution itself and the ensuing occupation of the U.S. Embassy, which then–Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989) praised as the “Second Revolution.” The June election marked the culmination of a gradual but calculated effort by regime hard-liners to dominate even the limited powers of the elected offices. The February 2004 parliamentary elections constituted the first stage of this effort to consolidate power in the hands of Khamenei and his coterie of conservative Muslim clerics, Revo-

lutionary Guard commanders, paramilitary Basijis, and segments of the bazaar-merchant class connected to the notoriously right-wing Hojatiyye and Motalefe groups.⁵ In the context of Iran's past, the flawed elections of 2004 and 2005 hardly represent an anomaly. But considering the country's current political landscape, and the crisis of authority and economy that plagues the regime, these elections take on singular significance. The regime's power grab has been so abrasive in its methods and so sweeping in its scope that it has brought about the widest rift yet between different factions of powerful clerics.⁶

The source of this rift is an apartheid-like theory that the regime's pundits and propagandists developed not long after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. This theory, holding that Iranian society was divided into camps of "insiders" and "outsiders," drew from early Islam's Manichean outlook, which divided the world between the "house of Islam" and the "house of unbelief." In the years following the revolution, only "insiders" had the right to stand for office and fight among themselves for more turf and whenever the system faced demands or threats from outsiders, the clerical establishment, as the center of the insider camp, would close ranks and offer a united front.

Even among the most fervent advocates of Iran's reform movement, this distinction between insiders and outsiders lingers on. One of the most important reform theorists, Saeed Hajjarian, has argued that opportunity for change in the Islamic Republic occurs when there is pressure from below and bickering at the top. Implicit in this idea is still the clear division between the insiders at the "top," where the real power lies, and the outsiders "below," who are at best used only as bargaining chips in the games of the powerful.

The 2005 election brought about the most serious division yet among those at the top. At least two of the pillars of the clerical establishment—former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Khamenei—engaged in a fierce and all but public confrontation. Not only did Rafsanjani vow that if elected, he would move to limit the powers of the spiritual leader, but his proposed foreign policy and economic pragmatism also posed a direct challenge to Khamenei's intransigence. Even in the aftermath of the election, serious tensions remained between different factions and personalities.

More important than schisms at the top, however, are the voices of reformist thinkers—once stalwarts of the regime but now champions of democracy—like Akbar Ganji, Abdollah Nouri, Abbas Abdi, Mohsen Kadivar, and Abdul Karim Soroush, all of whom reject their own past radical Islamic ideas, as well as the very notion of insiders and outsiders. In his March 2002 "Republican Manifesto,"⁷ and in more recent letters from prison, investigative journalist Akbar Ganji has argued for a system in which every Iranian—regardless of creed, color, gender, or class—has a natural and equal right to participate in the political pro-

cess and to exercise full sovereign power over the affairs of the nation. In such a system, the supreme leader would be popularly elected and would serve a limited term.⁸ The transition to democracy, if and when it is to take place, will require not only splits within the regime, but also the growth of principled reformist voices such as Ganji's.

Democracy's Advocates and Opponents

Khamenei's exploitation of elections for the purpose of legitimizing the regime's absolutist rule has deep roots in the quarter-century history of the Islamic Republic. Its founder and architect, Ayatollah Khomeini, had a particularly troubled relationship with the concept of elections. The foundational ideas behind his notion of the absolute power of the single, supreme Islamic jurisprudent (*faqih*)—an idea shared by few other major Shi'ite clerics—are structurally similar to the rule of the philosopher-king described by Socrates in Plato's *Republic*.⁹ Plato and Socrates argue that philosophers should rule because they have a monopoly on knowledge; Khomeini holds that the ayatollahs have such a monopoly on this-worldly knowledge, a key to other-worldly salvation, and that they therefore have the right—indeed the responsibility—to rule.¹⁰ For both Plato's Socrates and for Khomeini, the ruler is not a servant of the public but rather its shepherd or guardian, and his legitimacy flows not from a social contract validated by the people through elections, but rather from a suprasocial or metahistorical phenomenon (or divine right, in the case of Khomeini).¹¹ In both of these paradigms, democracy is a dangerous diversion from the contented polity wherein the shepherd rules with an iron staff, comfortable in the belief that he alone possesses the truth.

Long before his ascent to power, in his first major theologico-political statement on the questions and challenges that modernity posed to Islam and to Iran, Khomeini derided the concept of parliaments and their legislative powers. He suggested instead that salvation would come to human societies only if they clung to the absolute, infallible, atemporal laws issued by God through his greatest and final prophet, and interpreted and enforced by God's viceroys, the Shi'ite ayatollahs.

Twentieth-century Shi'ite political theory has been dominated by a debate that began around the time of the Iranian constitutional revolution in 1905. At that time, the preeminent Shi'ite leader, Ayatollah Na'ini of Najaf,¹² wrote a seminal treatise arguing that in the absence of the twelfth imam—the supreme successor to Muhammad whom Shi'ites believe to be miraculously hidden from ordinary human perception—an Islamic government could not be constructed. Na'ini argued that the government of Islam is the government of God on earth, and it is incumbent on every Muslim to follow its orders. Precisely for this reason, however, Islamic government requires the infallible wisdom of the imam

himself at its helm; mere mortals are incapable of ruling in the name of God. While the world awaits the return of the twelfth imam, argued Na'ini, the form of governance most compatible with Shi'ism is democracy—shaped and defined by a popularly ratified constitution (which, of course, may not contradict the tenets of Islam).¹³ In recent years, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, also of Najaf although Iranian by birth, has effectively revived this perspective as applied to the democratic governance of Iraq.

Opposed to Na'ini's views were the opinions of another ayatollah, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri. The only ayatollah executed in the modern history of Iran (his death warrant came in the form of a *fatwa* from other leading clergy), Nouri was a strict traditionalist, a champion of an absolutist fundamentalism based solely on Islamic *shari'a*. Khomeini would later advocate Nouri's paradigm, with the variation that Khomeini's is a voluntarist vision which dismisses the idea of waiting for the return of the twelfth imam. Khomeini argues that while the imam remains hidden, the ayatollahs are God's viceroys on earth, and they should (once circumstances permit) create a state based on *shari'a*.

In Khomeini's words, Shi'ite clerics are the prophet's progeny, and as such they are the sole legitimate rulers of Shi'ite societies, whatever the actual members of such societies may think.¹⁴ The clerics' legitimacy is not determined by the vote of the people, nor can it be tarnished or undermined by such a vote. In other words, elections are altogether unnecessary. Islamic government, ordained by God and oblivious to public approval, is the only form of legitimate power; all other forms of power—secular, democratic, or despotic—are entirely illegitimate. Khomeini first wrote these words in 1941; although in later years he occasionally tempered his words to fit passing political expediencies (particularly during his brief exile in Paris in late 1978), the core of his ideas remained unchanged for the rest of his life. Upon his return to Tehran after the Islamic Revolution, he began to renege on the democratic promises that he had made while in Paris. As soon as he was powerful enough, he put into motion plans for implementing his long-cherished idea of a clergy-dominated Islamic government.

In spite of his charisma, however, Khomeini's antidemocratic beliefs could not drill through the bedrock of overwhelming public sentiment in favor of democracy. In the context of the global "third wave" of democratization, during which so many tattered totalitarian regimes began to wither away, the ayatollah's ideas appeared even more anomalous. Nevertheless, even as other despotic regimes were fading, the Islamic Republic emerged. In order to reconcile Khomeini's undemocratic ideas with the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people, an incongruous and unworkable compromise was devised and included in the constitution of the Islamic Republic. All real power was placed in the hands of the unelected, unimpeachable supreme leader and the Guardian Council of clerics that he appointed. As a necessary nod to the democratic

aspirations of the people, however, a popularly elected president and parliament received perfunctory and limited powers.

Neither Khomeini nor his successors could tolerate this limited but serious acknowledgement of the people's democratic electoral rights. Instead, they made it clear that the vote of the people was considered "consultative" and that the people's choice for president could be "empowered" only via the supreme leader's approval. In the mid-1980s, the Guardian Council—constitutionally entrusted with the task of ensuring that laws passed by the parliament do not conflict with *shari'a*—took it upon itself to vet all candidates, ensuring that only those agreeable to the supreme leader can get into the race.

Many of the constitution's framers, including senior ayatollah and former parliamentary chairman Hossein Montazeri, have insisted that vetting candidates was never part of the intended mandate of the Guardian Council.¹⁵ Before the June 2005 presidential election, the Council disqualified almost a thousand candidates, including the main reformist candidate Mostafa Mo'in, who had been holding various cabinet posts for the past decade. The Council also decided to announce publicly the results of the crucial first round of the election, although by law the Interior Ministry is in charge of the vote count. The announcement was surprising not only because it lacked any basis in law or practice but also because the results were so different from those the Interior Ministry later released.

In modern Iranian politics, elections have not served to limit the power of the entrenched elite, but instead have become a tool of that elite's patronage and propaganda. And yet, much genuine change has happened in the century between the 1905 election, in which only a few wealthy males voted, and the 2005 election, which saw almost universal suffrage.¹⁶ Furthermore, with the rapid development of civil society institutions and forces in Iran—at least 8,000 NGOs and 65,000 Web loggers—and with the heady taste of victory after the election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Iranians had begun to develop faith in the power and privilege of voting. The latest election has now severely damaged this emerging sense of citizenship and incipient faith in the ballot box. Surrounding the election was a widespread belief that the entrenched despotic elite had used money and muscle to rig the race, in a pattern that the despots will readily repeat. Indeed, throughout the agonizing history of elections in Iran, one of the few constants has been the definitive and deforming role of the central despotic authority in determining outcomes.

Oil and Democracy

Another unchanging aspect of Iranian elections has been the influence of oil money on the political landscape in general and on election

results in particular. History has tragically but clearly shown that in the absence of democracy and a free market—and the political and economic transparencies that each begets—oil becomes nothing less than a political, social, and even economic curse. Oil rents can make the state independent of popular support and taxes and breed a popular sense of entitlement that saps the spirit of hard work and frugality that is essential to modern capitalism. Indeed, oil-rich countries—which disproportionately rank among the most undemocratic in the world—seem to rely on a social contract entirely different from the kind of implicit and explicit bonds of citizenship and civil responsibility ubiquitous in modern democracies.¹⁷ Great Britain and Norway—both of which were securely democratic and market-oriented before they discovered oil—have been the only exceptions to this curse.

In oil-rich countries, the government holds the strings to the “petro-purse” and doles out cash and benefits to docile subjects. Even in an election open to elite rivalry, the government can use the power of the purse to determine the outcome. Iran’s 2005 presidential election is a case in point. According to three of the four leading candidates—Rafsanjani, Mo’in, and Mehdi Karrubi—millions of dollars from public coffers were illicitly funneled into the campaign of the successful candidate, Mahmoud Ahmehinejad. Much of this funding comes from the “revolutionary foundations” (*bonyads*), which comprise about half of Iran’s entire economy and which Supreme Leader Khamenei runs as his personal fiefdoms, without institutional or parliamentary oversight. In democratic countries, by contrast, the ultimate source of government revenue is taxation, and thus the state purse is generally open to public scrutiny.

All cannot be blamed on oil, however. The vicious cycle of despotism and political and economic corruption existed long before the discovery of oil in the early 1900s. The constitutional revolution of 1905 to 1907 was the first attempt to cure Iran’s political ills and catapult the country into modernity. Middle-class intellectuals with democratic leanings forced Mozafar al-Din Shah (r. 1896–1907) to ratify a new constitution that seriously curtailed his own powers. This document, which borrowed heavily from Belgium’s, was to be the blueprint for a more or less genuine democratic system. It provided for the separation of powers and a bicameral legislature, with a lower house directly elected by the country’s male population and a senate whose members were in equal numbers elected by the people and appointed by the shah, who was to reign but not to rule. At the same time, he remained the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and laws could be enacted only after he signed them. Much of the executive power was put in the hands of a prime minister, chosen by parliament subject to royal confirmation.

With this constitutional revolution, the hapless *rayat* (subjects) were

suddenly expected to become democratic citizens, and the all-powerful Gebley-e Alam (Pivot of the Universe) was to become their constitutional monarch. Aside from the absence of voting rights for women and the poor and the king's right to confirm the prime minister, the constitution had only one other "undemocratic" feature: Article Five, which had been added to appease the clergy, empowered a committee of five top clerics to veto any legislation that they deemed inimical to the spirit of Islam and *shari'a* (though the committee was never actually allowed to perform this function).

Even this truncated version of democracy proved untenable, however. All too soon, Iranians learned that democracy is more than just a set of commendable ideas, and requires an intricate network of institutions and a civil society to mediate between the people and power. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau never tired of reminding his readers, democracy is a highly sensitive organism, in need of constant monitoring and mentoring; it requires citizens who are conscious of the many perils that threaten it, who are committed to political patience, and who are well versed in the rules of tolerance.

In 1907, the conditions necessary for democracy, particularly a strong and viable civil society, were simply absent in Iran. In addition, a frightening array of powerful forces lined up against the creation of a genuine secular democracy in the country. Thus, the aftermath of the constitutional revolution brought not democracy, but almost two decades of chaos and civil war. The center could no longer hold, and centrifugal forces, sometimes strengthened by the British in the south or the Soviets in the north, threatened the territorial integrity of Iran.

In 1921, Reza Khan, a charismatic officer of the Cossack Brigade, joined forces with the rabble-rousing and eccentric journalist Seyyed Zia, and together they organized a military coup that toppled the government. They forced the weak, vacillating, hedonistic, and corrupt monarch, Ahmad Shah Qajar, to appoint Seyyed Zia prime minister and Reza Khan minister of war. Within four years, Khan had established himself as the most powerful person in the country by suppressing rebellions and establishing order. In 1925, a specially convened assembly deposed Ahmad Shah Qajar, and appointed Reza Khan (who had adopted the surname Pahlavi) as the new shah. This marked the inception of the Pahlavi dynasty.

Reza Shah Pahlavi was an autodidact and a despot. While he was a great modernizer, much in the vein of Turkey's Kemal Atatürk, he was also corrupt, greedy, and reluctant to heed the constitutional limits on his office. He turned parliament into a rubber-stamp assembly. He regularly held elections, and no less regularly made sure that only those of whom he approved were elected. To him, parliamentary seats were mainly patronage rewards and elections were empty gestures that gave his personal despotism a veneer of constitutionality, particularly in Western

eyes. Nonetheless, when choosing members of parliament, he generally insisted on appointing citizens of some local standing.

The Second World War drastically changed Iran's political landscape. Great Britain and the Soviet Union occupied Iran and forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r.1941–79), who was bereft of his father's authority and gravitas. Thus, from 1941 to 1953, Iran experienced something of a democratic interlude. From 1941 to 1945, Britain and the Soviet Union both openly intervened in Iran's elections, ensuring that those elected were friendly to the occupying powers' causes and agendas. Following the war, many powerful Iranian figures emerged from exile or marginalization into the political arena, and a plethora of political parties and groups formed. A particularly influential party was the National Front, which came to play an important role in Iranian politics for much of the second half of the twentieth century. Founded by the charismatic legislator Mohammad Mossadeq in 1949, it had two simple political ideas as its core values: Reform the electoral laws in order to ensure free and fair elections, and nationalize the Iranian oil industry previously monopolized by Britain. Half a century later, the same demand for free and fair elections remains the central plank of any democratic platform in Iran.

Mossadeq became prime minister in 1951, after his predecessor General Haji-Ali Razmara was assassinated. It is a measure of the troubled trajectory of Iranian elections that, although Mossadeq is generally considered the most democratically inclined prime minister, during his tenure, elections left much to be desired. The most egregious example was the referendum held in 1953 to decide the fate of an increasingly intransigent parliament. Mossadeq deliberately set up separate tents for casting "yea" and "nay" ballots, a clear violation of the secret-ballot ethic.

After overthrowing Mossadeq's government in August 1953, Mohammad Reza Shah began the most authoritarian years of his rule. For the next decade, elections were held irregularly, with the shah hand-picking the winners for each district, just as in his father's days. As a rule, an ad hoc committee—comprising the prime minister, the minister of court, and a representative of the secret police (SAVAK)—drew up a list of "winners" in a process that was marked by much bickering, back-biting, and bribing. The final list was then submitted to the shah for approval.¹⁸ Thus began what the shah called a period of "guided democracy," in which he was the guide and phony elections upheld the democratic façade.

By 1975, all pretense to democracy was put to an end when the shah decided to abolish the existing two-party system in favor of a one-party version. Every Iranian citizen was expected to join the party and vote in elections, although the results were even more preordained than before. In 1977, technocrats convinced the shah that it was time to experiment

by holding a few elections that would be freely conducted under certain conditions. Two small towns were picked to hold midterm parliamentary contests. The government chose two candidates for each town, allowed them to run campaigns, and saw to it that the voting was free, fair, and secret. The results were not discouraging, but before long the tumult of revolution ended not only this electoral experiment but the monarchy itself.

“Islamic” Elections

As soon as the shah had fallen, the nature of elections became a point of contention between Khomeini and his democratic opposition. The first battle was over the referendum to decide the fate of Iran’s monarchy: Khomeini wanted a one-question ballot, a simple yes or no to the creation of the Islamic Republic, while his democratic opponents unsuccessfully campaigned to offer people more choices. Later, elections to the Constituent Assembly, the Assembly of Experts, and the presidency became subjects of rancorous debate, with the ayatollah advocating and then instituting elections controlled by the clergy—sometimes even limited to clerics as both voters and candidates. Ultimately, the clergy won the right to supervise the process as well as the outcome of elections. In the apartheid-like political system that developed in the years following the revolution, the clergy and their “insider” allies occupied the center of power, while everyone else, depending on reliability and allegiance, was relegated to one of the outer circles.

Despite the many levers of power that the system had placed in the hands of the clergy, it took them a long time to learn how to manipulate national elections. In this sense, the June 2005 presidential election marks the culmination of the clergy’s gradual domination of the electoral process—the last facet of political life that had remained outside their control. In their quest to master this process, the clerics employed a complicated strategy that used millions of Revolutionary Guards and Basiji militiamen as electoral “foot soldiers.” The clergy boosted their favored candidate’s share of the vote with crass patronage and cash payments, and shrewdly utilized populist tricks that tapped into the grievances of the poor. Finally, the clerics launched Ahmedinejad as a virtual stealth candidate. He flew under the radar of public attention for weeks, and emerged as a serious contender only 48 hours before the first round. Behind him the clerics united the poor—enraged by endemic corruption and the growing disparities in wealth—with the very merchants and Revolutionary Guard commanders who have been the beneficiaries of this corrupt crony capitalism. It is a measure of the ruling clerics’ Machiavellian guile that they managed to create a *de facto* coalition of truly discordant forces.

Some Iranian democrats have pinned their hopes on the conservatives' final success in mastering the art of electoral manipulation. One reform advocate argues that the clergy's fear of democracy will soon dissipate, and that they too may join the game.¹⁹ But history leaves little room for this kind of optimism, since those who enjoy a monopoly on power rarely relinquish it voluntarily. Nonetheless, there is room for hope. Its source, however, is far removed from the possibility of sudden magnanimity on the part of those in power.

First and foremost, the coalition backing President Ahmedinejad will eventually shatter, because it has brought together interests that are simply irreconcilable. Second, Ahmedinejad's plan to return to the oil-financed pseudosocialism of the early 1980s is sure to result in nothing but economic disaster. Most importantly, the real sources of optimism are the continued vibrancy of civil society, women's unrelenting struggle for recognition of their rights, the increasing employment needs of young people, Iranian society's urgent desire to join the modern world, and finally, the open rift in the ranks of clerical power. Tactical pessimism about the process and the results of the June election can be tempered by strategic optimism, for only democracy can offer any hope of stable solutions to Iran's tangled web of problems. The power lust of the few cannot for much longer block the advent of what is a social, political, economic, and even historical imperative.

NOTES

1. For a survey of theoretical discussions regarding elections and their place in a democratic society, see Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 21–35.

2. In his study of the history of political thought, Sheldon Wolin writes of two types of political structures—those engaged in "soulcraft" and bent on changing human nature, and those who are satisfied with ensuring politics as a fair game between players. Totalitarian regimes are all engaged in "soulcraft" while liberal democracies are the best example of systems happy with statecraft. See Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973).

4. For a general discussion of the Islamic Republic's constitution, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, trans. John O'Kane (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).

5. While Hojatiyye, now led by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, was essentially a nonpolitical group committed to fighting the spread of Bahai faith, the Motalef was the terrorist group responsible for the 1964 death of Iranian prime minister Hassanali Mansur. For an account of his assassination, see Abbas Milani, *Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 2002).

6. Almost a month after the election, the Society of Militant Clergy, one of the

oldest and most powerful clerical groups, declared that they were on strike and would not convene their meetings unless Mehdi Karrubi—one of their leaders and a disgruntled defeated candidate—agreed to return to the organization and received serious responses to his complaints.

7. See Akbar Ganji's "The Struggle Against Sultanism" on pp. 38–51 of this issue of the *Journal of Democracy*.

8. Many papers and Web sites have published Ganji's letters and his manifesto. See, for example, www.iranemrooz.net/index.

9. For a discussion of Khomeini's ideas and their similarity to Plato, see Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003). Also see the chapter "Shadows on the Moon" in Abbas Milani, *Tales of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: Mage, 1996).

10. For the Platonic Socrates, women could easily become philosophers, but for the ayatollah, the realm of divine knowledge, and thus the title of ayatollah ("sign of God"), is closed to women.

11. See Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashef-al Asrar* (Discovery of mysteries) (Tehran: publisher unknown, 1943).

12. Najaf was then, as it is now, one of the two most important centers of Shi'ite learning. The Iranian city of Qom has been the other. For much of the twentieth century, the two cities have vied for preeminence. During the Pahlavi era, the Iranian regime made every effort to turn Najaf into the preeminent center.

13. For a discussion of Na'ini's views, see Abdul Hadi Haeri, *Shiism and Constitutionalism in Iran: A Study of the Role Played by the Persian Residents of Iraq in Iranian Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

14. For an English translation of his main tract on the subject, see Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. and annotated by Hamid Alga (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan, 1981).

15. In an open letter on the presidential election, Montazeri criticized the recent elections, declared that the constitution can and should be changed, and described the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. The text of his letter can be found at www.montazeri.com.

16. While men and women aged 16 and above are allowed to vote, if any member of the Bahai faith—not recognized as a "religious minority" in the constitution—insists on his or her religious identity, he or she is not only denied the right to vote but is also persecuted. Any child of Muslim parentage who decides to change faith is also committing a mortal sin, and is not only stripped of voting rights, but is considered an apostate (the punishment for apostasy is death).

17. Freedom House rates all countries annually based on the degree to which their citizens enjoy political rights and civil liberties. The ratings employ a 1-to-7 scale, on which 1 is the best score and 7 the worst. Oil-rich countries in the Middle East have been afforded an inglorious average score of 6, often teetering on the verge of 7. See www.freedomhouse.org.

18. For a discussion of this process, see Abbas Milani, *Persian Sphinx*.

19. Mohammad Guchani made the argument in an editorial for the periodical *Shargh*, to which he regularly contributes. See www.sharghnewspaper.com (in Persian).