

# USADI Dispatch

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## USADI Commentary

### Behind Election Low Turnout, a Vibrant Democracy Movement

The biggest story of last week's sham election in Iran was not the predictably grossly inflated vote tally; it was the non-participation, particularly in Tehran, of the most vibrant segment of Iran's population, the young people.

Buried in many news reports on the election by the mainstream US media was the boycott of the election by Tehran's youth who openly rejected the ruling regime, including the "reformist" faction. In an attempt at political brinksmanship just days before the election, Khatami's pathetic camp called for a boycott. Notwithstanding their leader's kowtowing to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the President's men tried to take credit for the low turnout afterwards.

By all accounts, the boycott call was first made by Iran's democratic opposition forces long before February 20th. *Agence France Presse* reported on October 18 that in a gathering of 20,000 Iranians in Dortmund, Germany, the leading Iranian opposition figure Maryam Rajavi called on the Iranian people to boycott the election farce. Her call for a United Nations-supervised regime change referendum was beamed into Iran live via satellite.

For weeks, the slogans of "no to Sham Election" and "Referendum on regime change, this is people's demand" adorned the walls, billboards and lamp posts in Tehran and other major cities. It was reported that many people in Isfahan, Iran's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city, had written slogans in support of referendum on bank notes. The turnout the Interior Ministry reported for Isfahan, was 32 percent lower than four years ago.

The Ministry announced a 28 percent turnout for Tehran, including the 16 percent of the votes declared void because they were blank. A quick math shows that 77 percent of Tehranis did not vote, with the young people a solid majority among the no shows. Several told reporters that just a "spark... could ignite demonstrations or riots" against the clerical regime.

On Tuesday, CIA Director George Tenet told the US Senate that Iran's ruling theocracy is "secure for now." No matter how secure the mullahs may be perceived, this is calm before the storm. 25 years ago, just a "spark" set in motion the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, perceived as "the island of stability."

Tehran's ruling elite has ruled Iran with an iron fist for the past quarter century. To prevent the profound political, economical and social problems from boiling over, it will as Mr. Tenet said, "resort to new heavy-handedness" at home and "use its media, aid money, and diplomacy, as well as clandestine operations, to advance its interests and counter U.S. influence in Iraq."

US should seize this unique opportunity and declare its support for Iran's secular democracy movement; it should close the book on the "engagement" with the ruling tyrants in Tehran. Last Tuesday, President Bush, "condemn[ed] the Iranian regime's efforts to stifle freedom of speech," adding that "the United States supports the Iranian people's aspirations to live in freedom, enjoy their God-given rights and determine their own destiny." Now, we should turn this pledge into a solid policy against the mullahs. The *Wall Street Journal* was spot on in its editorial the same day: "The only way to stop Iran's despotic regime from getting nuclear weapons is to help Iranians change the regime." The time to act is now.

## More on Election Farce

Religious hard-liners took control of the parliament after a short, troubled political season filled with comical election charades, such as people suddenly lining up and pretending to vote when reporters arrived and candidates running at the order of their well-connected bosses. (*Washington Times*, Feb. 25)

... Khamenei and the Council of Guardians can't afford to have their authority challenged from within while the US tries to rid the region of terrorist regimes... Many authoritarian regimes implode after they crack down harder on dissent. (*Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 23)

Iran's theocrats have wrenched back control of the parliament... ending what turned out to be a delusion that the Islamic Republic could be reformed from within. (*Financial Times*, Feb. 23)

Police officers and plainclothes security agents stood listening as foreign reporters tried to interview voters coming out of the polling station... "There's no difference from the Shah, just the clothes have changed," Raheleh, a young woman, said. "He had a crown, this one has a turban." (*Guardian*, Feb. 21)

Reformists and conservatives know that if Iran's youths took to the streets en masse, they could undo any regime. (*Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 23)

The men who ran the shah into exile now imitate him with their authoritarian rule. Their obduracy dares Iranians to change the regime through mass protest movements rather than elections. It is a challenge citizens eventually accept when autocrats block their alternatives. (*Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 21)

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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**National Review Online**  
**February 23, 2004**  
**The Great Iranian Election Fiasco**

Even for a regime that excels in deception, the announcement by the Iranian government that nearly half the eligible voters cast their ballots in Friday's election is an extraordinary bit of effrontery... The real numbers are a tiny fragment of the official ones. The overall turnout came in at about twelve percent, with Tehran a bit lower, and places like Isfahan and Qom (of all places, the headquarters of the Shiite religious elite) closer to five percent...

Keep in mind that the reporters knew full well that all but a handful of polling sites in Tehran — the only place they were able to observe, thanks to the usual clampdown on information — were virtually dead. They knew, or should have known, that the regime had trotted out more than 10,000 "mobile voting booths," that is to say, trucks driving around inviting people to vote. They surely heard the stories — widely repeated on Iranian web sites — of thousands of phony ballots, and of citizens being forced to turn over their identity cards, thus making it possible for others to pose as legitimate voters. They must also have heard that high-school students were warned that if they did not vote they would never get into the universities.

Instead of this important information, we get the usual election-day analysis, as if a real election had been conducted, and one could understand something important about Iranian public opinion from the official numbers...

The regime clearly intends to clamp down even harder in the immediate future. Hints of this were seen in the run-up to the election... One wonders whether any Western government is prepared to speak the truth about Iran, or whether they are so determined to arrive at make-believe deals — for terrorists that are never delivered, for promises to stop the nuclear program, that are broken within minutes of their announcement, or for help fighting terrorism while the regime does everything in its power to support the terrorists — that they will play along and pretend, as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has put it, that "Iran is a democracy."...

Finally, perhaps our enterprising journalists could ask the administration how it can be, three years after inauguration, that we still have no Iran policy. Yes, Virginia, there is still no National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD) on Iran, even though Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, and we claim to be in a war against the terror masters. Faster, please.

*Excerpts from an article by Michael Ledeen, Resident Scholar in the Freedom Chair at the American Enterprise Institute*

**The Wall Street Journal (Editorial)**  
**February 24, 2004**  
**The Iranian Deception**

So when are President Bush's critics, including those in his own State Department, going to concede that he was right all along to include Iran in the "axis of evil"? Now would seem to be an apt moment, after last Friday's sham election in which Tehran's ruling clerics bullied their way to a majority in what passes for a parliament. The mullahs also fessed up over the weekend to yet another instance of deceiving U.N. nuclear inspectors, conveniently ahead of a report this week from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohammed El Baradei. The most logical interpretation of all this is that Iran's junta is betting its survival on a crash program to build a nuclear bomb. By the way, does Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage still think Iran is operating a "democracy," as he noted not long ago? Just checking.

As for the elections, they ought to mark the end of President Mohammad Khatami as a repository of Western and Iranian hopes for reform... But Mr. Khatami backed off on threats to resign as laws curbing the power of the Guardian Council and the judiciary were vetoed. His credibility never recovered...

Even the cynical, oil-driven countries of Old Europe recognize the significance of the coup that's just happened -- at least as a public relations blow to their policy of "constructive engagement." The mullahs made "a genuine democratic choice by the Iranian people impossible," read a joint statement from EU foreign ministers. As ever, France's Dominique de Villepin isn't quite ready to write off a planned trade deal: "We have to wait and see how things emerge."

No doubt forgiveness will be the temptation in Washington too. With the U.S. already committed in Iraq, Mr. Armitage and his allies will tempt Mr. Bush with the offer that he can win new concessions on WMD if he keeps quiet about elections and human rights. In addition, the Iranian regime has been signaling it may turn over the al Qaeda members in its custody, or at least not make too much trouble for U.S. troops next door.

We should have learned by now this is a fool's game, entirely at odds with Mr. Bush's "forward strategy of freedom" in the Middle East. Now is precisely the time for Mr. Bush to show solidarity with the majority of Iranians who want greater freedom, just as Ronald Reagan spoke up for the people of Poland in the early 1980s. The only way to stop Iran's despotic regime from getting nuclear weapons is to help Iranians change the regime.