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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

An Election Nobody Will Win

By ALI SAFAVI

WASHINGTON — It doesn't take a crystal ball to predict that Iran's ruling mullahs will be victorious in the parliamentary elections scheduled for Friday. After all, to protest the disqualification of thousands of candidates by the government's all-powerful Guardian Council, more than a third of Parliament has resigned and rival parties have vowed to boycott the voting. Still, no matter how many seats the clerical establishment gains, it will be a Pyrrhic victory — the regime is going to be far more vulnerable to the growing dissatisfaction of the Iranian public and less legitimate to the rest of the world.

This is not to say the official opposition will gain much, either. Seven years after Mohammad Khatami won the presidency on pledges of reform, few Iranians have any illusions about substantial changes under the current system. Everything that has played out in recent weeks — the three-week-long sit-in in Parliament by 80 disqualified incumbents, the widespread resignations of government officials, the Interior Ministry's refusal to organize the unfair elections — got lots of international press coverage, but it did little to reverse the Iranian public's widespread apathy about politics.

Average Iranians know that all this political wrangling is not really about their fundamental rights to free speech and representative government. Rather, it is an internal power play between the hard-liners and the reformists over who gets a bigger share of power in the current system.

In fact, Mr. Khatami's reformist rhetoric, with its sprinkling of quotations from Voltaire and Tocqueville, has done more to provide cover for European trade with Tehran than to improve the lives of ordinary Iranians. The public hangings, amputations, floggings of women and crackdowns on dissidents continue. According to the state-run news media, since the beginning of the year at least 31 people have been hanged. According to human-rights groups, economic misery, bureaucratic corruption, drug addiction and prostitution continue to rise.

The mullahcracy is so loathed that fewer than 10 percent of the electorate turned out for municipal elections last year — even though the vote was organized by President Khatami's forces. The electoral process is a self-serving practice where all candidates must declare allegiance to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Thus it was no surprise that despite an earlier pledge not to permit an unfair election this month, Mr. Khatami eventually capitulated to Ayatollah Khamenei and is allowing Friday's charade to go ahead.

In the end, it matters little whether the pro-Khatami candidates are on the ballot or not. As the Pentagon adviser Richard Perle said at a gathering of some 5,000 Iranian-Americans last month, "There is no question where the power lies in Iran today — it isn't through the electoral process, it isn't through those people who stand for elections, it's with a handful of self-appointed dictators."

There is only one way to change the situation: a United Nations-supervised referendum on regime change. Leading Iranian exiles including Maryam Rajavi have long called for such a measure, and there are now clear indicators that the Iranian people would welcome it. A government survey last year found that 45 percent of respondents wanted the political system totally changed, even if it involved foreign intervention. (And if nearly half of Iranians were willing to say this to official pollsters, you can imagine how strong the anti-mullah sentiment really is.) Last June, tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to demand a nationwide referendum on regime change.

Of course, a referendum is anathema to the mullahs, who know that given the opportunity, millions in Iran would vote them out of office. That's why 4,000 of those protesters were arrested and, according to Amnesty International, many have yet to be released.

Unfortunately, the United States has sent mixed signals to Tehran. While President Bush has been unequivocal in encouraging the democracy movement, the State Department has pushed hard for negotiating with the mullahs. The department arranged a travel waiver for Iran's United Nations envoy — who is usually confined to a 25-mile circle around New York City because of a lack of diplomatic relations between the countries — to fly to Washington in January to meet with a bipartisan Congressional delegation. It has endorsed sending a Congressional delegation to Tehran on the 25th anniversary of the clerics' rise to power. (The department has even classified the Iranian National Council of Resistance, an exile group of which I am a former official, as a "terrorist organization.")

To believe that the United States can do business with tyrants in Tehran is counterproductive. Not only would a new effort at diplomacy give the mullahs a shot in the arm precisely when they face growing popular opposition, but it would signal that America is willing to negotiate with a regime that uses terror at home and abroad.

The so-called reform movement is a spent force. Millions of average Iranians have shown courage in calling for the only thing that can bring about true reform: a referendum for regime change. Washington would do well to embrace that call.

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