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COMMENTARY

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In the Mullahs' Shadow

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As Iranians go to the polls on Friday to elect a successor to Mohammad Khatami, the high hopes for reform that brought him to power in 1997 have given way to fear that the hardliners will use this election to consolidate their power and reach an accommodation with the West. Eight years ago, Iranians hoped the election of a reformist would lead to political change, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. President Khatami made peace with Iran's oil-producing neighbors, expanded ties with the European Union, and allowed the development of a vocal opposition. Secret executions and assassinations have largely stopped, and jailing without trial of dissidents has subsided. Even the hardliners' candidates speak of the need for reforms.

But the pace of reforms has ground almost to a halt. The hardliners have shut down more than 90 reformist newspapers and other publications, and some of Iran's best writers and journalists are either in prison or in exile. In many cases, trials are held behind closed doors and without a jury; and judges declare verdicts that seem to be purely political.

The Guardian Council, a constitutional body controlled by Islamic hardliners, has thwarted many of the reforms introduced by President Khatami and his allies. In principle, the Council should approve bills passed by parliament after ensuring their conformity

with Islamic laws. But in practice, it has barred reformist candidates from standing in elections and has vetoed legislation aimed at curbing its power. The hardliners have also jailed university students, intellectuals, dissidents and rights activists, and President Khatami has failed to overcome the Council's obstruction of reform.

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Friday's presidential election is another part of the political process under the heavy hand of the Guardian Council. The election will not be free and fair because the Council controls who can stand. The main reformist candidate, former Minister of Higher Education Mostafa Moeen, has been allowed to run. But many other qualified candidates -- including every woman -- have been disqualified. Meanwhile, hardliners are exploiting many of the state's resources (including radio and television) to promote their candidates, while censoring many progressive positions of Dr. Moeen and attacking his supporters.

The hardliners view victory in the upcoming elections as the final step in consolidating their grip on power, following last year's rigged parliamentary elections. They already control many of the unelected instruments of power, and have put forward four candidates, all of whom are connected to the most powerful branch of the armed forces, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards.

Another candidate, the powerful former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, is running on a platform of economic reforms and improved relations with the U.S. Although he has some differences with Iran's hardliners and is not supported by them, he cannot lead Iran toward a more democratic future. It was during his presidency that the murder of intellectuals and dissidents began, massive foreign debts were run up, corruption and cronyism became rampant, and hyperinflation became the rule rather than the exception.

Today, Western countries are preoccupied with curbing Iran's nuclear program rather than helping Iranian people to reform the government behind the program. The true danger behind Iran's nuclear program is its decision-making process, which is shrouded in secrecy (unlike in India, a nuclear power but a democracy). The hardliners, who are the program's driving force, have an ideological and naive view of the world and are fiercely opposed to Iran's democratic movement. But military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities would only inflame nationalist sentiment, and likely rally Iranians around the hardliners' government. At the same time, the hardliners will use such attacks to suppress Iran's internal democratic movement, invoking a threat to Iran's national security.

What many Iranians fear is that if the hardliners win the election, they would offer significant concessions to the West in return for a free hand in running Iran. Pledges to help stabilize Iraq and curtail Iran's nuclear program might seem attractive to the U.S. or to the EU, but the West should bear in mind the longer-term dangers. Turning a blind eye to human rights abuses, when the vast majority of Iranians desire mutually respectful relations with the West, would only increase their suspicion of the West's underlying motives. The U.S. has already tried two such deals with unpopular and undemocratic groups in Iran. Both had disastrous results. First, after the 1953 coup, the U.S. propped up the Shah's dictatorship, which eventually led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Second, in the 1980s, efforts to reach a secret deal with Iran's hardliners led to the Iran-contra scandal. Therefore, if the West seeks to negotiate another such deal with the hardliners, it would thoroughly discredit the claim of wanting to foster democracy and human rights in the Middle East.

Whatever the results at the polls, the West does have leverage. The hardliners need continued commerce with the EU, and are looking for the same with the U.S. We have already had four years of

dialogue between Iran and the EU regarding Iran's violations of human rights. This has been largely fruitless because the EU has not been willing to back up its demands by practical steps. The EU (and, through the EU, the U.S.) should declare unequivocally that the foreign investment will be provided only if a truly democratic political system is established. The EU should make clear to Iran's hardliners that it will not expand its political and commercial relations with Iran (and is ready to curtail them, if necessary) unless Tehran undertakes meaningful reforms, including freeing political prisoners, allows true freedom of speech and the development of an independent press, and permits all political groups to participate in the political process through elections that are considered free and fair by the international community.

Such a clear-cut declaration in support of reform, backed by practical steps, will help Iran's democratic movement to continue its slow but steady progress. And while Iran has a fundamental right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy and technology, only the institutions for a democratic society will be able to uncover nuclear adventures that Iran's hidden power-centers may wish to pursue.

Over the past 100 years, Iran has endured two revolutions, two military coups engineered by foreign powers, and two foreign invasions. But the peaceful revolution that Iran needs today is one that would bring reform and the rule of law, a representative and transparent government, and respect for human dignity. Such a revolution will also have a profound effect on the entire Middle East and Central Asia.

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