THE AYATOLLAH AND AHMADINEJAD

An Interview With Mehrzad Boroujerdi

Conducted by Chris Chen

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Iranian discontent with President Ahmadinejad's strong rhetoric, hard-line politics, and publicstatements on religion—seen as improper for the secular president—continues to grow. How has Ayatollah Khamenei dealt with the criticism of Ahmadinejad, publicly and privately? Overall, have Ahmadinejad's policies helped or hurt Khamenei?

Frankly, considering the rather nontransparent nature of Iranian politics, we are not privy to conversations that go on between those two individuals. What we can say, therefore, is really based on speculation and reading the tea leaves in terms of public pronouncements that each makes. Now, the Supreme Leader,

I think, because of his conservative predilections, has been rather supportive of Ahmadinejad. But I would not describe this as a blank check by any stretch of the imagination. On certain occasions, he has indirectly or diplomatically criticized Ahmadinejad for his rhetoric, for some of his choices, etc. Other individuals close to Ayatollah Khamenei have criticized Ahmadinejad for his actions. For example, in July 2008 when Ahmadinejad was introducing three new ministers for his Cabinet, he tried to get approval from the Iranian Parliament by saying that these folks had the blessing of the Supreme Leader. Then an editor of a conservative newspaper that is very close to Ayatollah Khamenei came out and criticized the president publicly and said, "You have misconstrued what the Supreme Leader told you in private." That's the type of thing you see—a number of people who speak for the Supreme Leader in that type of a context. But I think by and large, on the main issues—i.e., on the nuclear confrontation—he has been supportive of the president, but for example, when it came to questioning and politicizing the Holocaust, Khamenei did not necessarily come to Ahmadinejad's defense and was quite silent on the issue.

Do you see Khamenei supporting Ahmadinejad in next year's presidential election?

It depends, really, on who is in the running. Ahmadinejad was clearly not the first choice in 2005, when we had the ninth presidential election. Depending on who enters the scene, Khamenei might support a different horse in the race. For example, if the present Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani, who is a former nuclear negotiator, enters the presidential race, that might make it more complicated for Khamenei to support Ahmadinejad. However, keep in

mind that technically, he's supposed to remain neutral and not endorse a particular candidate in the race. But again, as I said, people can read between the lines of what he says.

What role does the Iranian Parliament play in the relationship between the Ayatollah and the secular government? Given conflicts such as Ahmadinejad's refusal to implement bills and Parliament's rejection of Cabinet appointees, what kind of balance has been struck between the President and Parliament?

The Iranian Parliament is an institution that historically, because of the intense factional nature of Iranian politics, has seen a lot of debates and even at times fistfights erupt in the building. It is not a rubber-stamp institution, contrary to many of the parliaments of the region. What is the role of Parliament? Basically, Parliament is supposed to make sure that the government is pursuing policies that are consistent with the spirit of the Constitution or make socioeconomic sense. For example, Ahmadinejad, who has been pursuing a form of populist politics, has been going to the four corners of Iran and handing out money for various projects as a way of incurring favor with the locals. This has all been made possible thanks to an emergency fund set up under Khatami for the extra petrodollars—to keep them for a rainy day—so that Iran would not be subject to disruption. Ahmadinejad is tapping into that reserve of money to carry on these projects, so the Parliament has been clashing with him at times about his misuse of these emergency funds. As you pointed out, they have not given a green light to the people he has put forward as ministers.

For example, when he came into office in 2005, he had to put forward four different candidates before his Minister of Petroleum was approved by the Parliament—the first three were rejected. So the Presidency is not necessarily the 'top gun' institution in Iranian politics, by any stretch of the imagination, because you have all of these unelected bodies, like the Guardian Council or the Expediency Council, that in many ways can overrule or modify the decisions made by the Parliament. But the Parliament is important in Iranian politics because as an elected institution, it in some ways does reflect the public, and allows for circulation of elites, in a way for which the non-elected institutions would not allow. We see a lot of people who, for example, come to Parliament for one term and then get voted out—perhaps they couldn't bring the pork barrel projects to their province, or perhaps they somehow managed to alienate either their constituency or powerful political factions, and therefore they have ended their experience in Parliament. Then there are others who have been there close to 30 years.

In a 2007 Syracuse Law Review article, you wrote, "President Ahmadinejad has nothing even close to solid control" because "[the] Iranian political structure...[has] multiple checks against a single individual attempting to assert control." Is Ahmadinejad making any effort to consolidate power? Can he assert more control?

Well, he certainly is. To his credit, he has certainly used the office of the president much better than his predecessor, Mr. Khatami, to sort of flex his muscles and put himself on the map. Surely, through his pronouncements, he has endeared himself in a strange way to the media, buying publicity and so forth. I think the answer is that he is trying to do that, but I wouldn't say that he has managed to fundamentally alter that configuration of power in Iran in any way. Based on the Constitution, the mandate of the president is a bit truncated. So, for example, one of the mistakes we make in the West is that we look at the American political system where the

president is the commander-in-chief and assume that the Iranian president has the same authority. He doesn't. In Iran, the buck does not stop with the President.

The Supreme Leader is the one that counts. You can have powerful individuals, like Rafsanjani, the former president, who now simultaneously leads two important institutions of power in Iran. So he becomes a political heavyweight that can rival the president. Yes, Ahmadinejad has been much more adept, much more successful in inserting himself into the Iranian political equation than a person like Khatami. Perhaps he can become as influential as Rafsanjani when he was President, but I wouldn't even say Ahmadinejad has surpassed Rafsanjani in that sense, because he was much, much closer to Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder, than Ahmadinejad has ever been thought to be to Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader.

What do the 2008 parliamentary elections, in which conservatives won more than 200 of 290 seats, show about how much the people support the government? What about the election of Larijani, seen as a more "pragmatic" critic of Ahmadinejad, as Speaker of Parliament?

I think the elections sent a different type of message than what people expected in the sense that there were a good number of independent-minded deputies who were elected.

Some of the individuals who are conservative but aren't necessarily in the same camp as Ahmadinejad—in other words, the more pragmatic conservatives—did very well in the elections as well. We have already seen signs of disunity in the conversative camp, and certainly the election of Larijani himself as Speaker of the Parliament was a big show of support for these more pragmatic conservatives. Larijani may feel, perhaps, that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric has unduly subjected Iran to more diplomatic pressure and public condemnation. This assessment will lead Larijani to try to contest some of Ahmadinejad's policies in the remainder of this term and once again if he is reelected in 2009. Keep in mind that Larijani is the person whom Ahmadinejad basically forced out as the top nuclear negotiator, so his election as Speaker of Parliament speaks volumes about what goes on in Iranian politics and the fact that Ahmadinejad really doesn't hold all of the keys.

In Oil in the Gulf, you predicted, "The deep-rooted demands for reform on the part of Iran's young, educated and urban polity indicate that a genuine reformist social movement is quite capable of cutting its umbilical cord to President Khatami, should he fail to keep up the pace." After Khatami's rule, voter turnout amongst Iranians has decreased considerably. How have the political views of Iran's population—in which approximately half the people are under 30—changed in the last decade?

I stand by what I said in that article. I think what has happened in Iran is that there has been a revolution of rising expectations because you have a young, urban, and educated population; as a result, there are a lot of pent-up demands among the constituency. However, this constituency in many ways feels betrayed by the failures of President Khatami to deliver on his reformist agenda. In that sense, they feel let down, and I think that partly explains the swing of popular mood in favor of Ahmadinejad in 2005. But they have, in my view, broken the umbilical cord to Khatami because already, in the speculation for the next round of elections, many of the

mainstream reformists want Khatami to once again become their candidate, but there are already voices of dissent heard by people who say, "He had eight years; he didn't accomplish much. Why should we put him on the ballot once again? We need better candidates or else we aren't going to vote; we're going to boycott the elections." So you hear those types of sentiments, but unfortunately we are in a situation right now where the reformists do not necessarily have a charismatic candidate that they can put forward. I would not be surprised if they end up next year with Khatami as their top candidate.

In a 2007 article, you wrote, "Nationalism is still an important value within the regime and among the public...[it] is also a dangerous force, but it is at least something that we have experience with and can adapt our policy to deal with." What role does nationalism play in the relationship between the government and the people, and how does it affect U.S. policy towards Iran's nuclear program?

I think it plays a crucial, crucial role. Iranians are extremely nationalistic; regardless of all of the talk of Islamic affinity and so forth, at the core, they are extremely nationalistic. This is a country that has gone through the

unbelievable experience of the eight-year war with Iraq, which in many ways made the defense of the country's sovereignty and its borders even more sacrosanct than before.

Therefore, no politician in Iran, at this point in time, can really pursue or advocate for policies that violate the spirit of nationalism. In many ways, ironically enough, the extra emphasis of the present regime on the Islamic identity has led to backlash on the part of many who are holding ever more tightly to their nationalistic sentiments. Some have gone back to the pre-Islamic identity of Iranians. I think as far as the nuclear issue is concerned, it is true that the Iranians think that this issue is one of national interest. Look at it this way—the Iranians feel that they are the big kid on the block, as far as the Middle Eastern region or Persian Gulf are concerned, and everywhere they look—to the east, west, north, south— they feel surrounded by other nuclear powers from Israel to Russia, India to Pakistan, China to North Korea. U.S. nuclear submarines are in the region. There is a contradiction there— you cannot be the big kid on the block and not have the goodies that your adversaries have.

So I think the Iranian government has been able to tap into that sense of the Iranian superiority complex, if you wish—their sense of nationalism—to justify the importance of this argument. Frankly, as long as the argument on the Iranian side is not about nuclear weapons but about nuclear energy—keep in mind that there is a shortage of electricity there—no one in their right mind would be able to go against this notion of wanting to have nuclear energy. If it's good for the U.S. and France and the Western countries, why is it bad for Iran? I think that is really a subtext to this nuclear stalemate that we have right now. I think the high-handedness with which the folks in Washington have tried to handle Iran has not worked, and I think it is high time that we recognize that there is a need to change policy.

What conclusions can you draw from your research on the writings and debates between Iranian intellectual elites?

I think the debates in Iran are, frankly, really quite impressive, because three things have happened in Iran that haven't happened in many other countries in the region. One, having experienced a genuine revolution, which we have hardly any of in the Middle East—we have had a lot of coups, palace coups, wars of national liberation, resistance to occupation, but nothing else on the scale of a massive homegrown revolution—Iran is set apart from the rest of the region. The second interesting experience is one of dealing with a theocratic state in the twenty-first century, with all the limitations and shortcomings of what a theocratic state can be. What's interesting is that there was no blueprint for this new government to follow once it came into power in 1979 and that they had to go through this trial-and-error method of statecraft to learn on the job. Thirdly, this whole issue of what we are going to do with not just Western imperialism and so forth but with the legacy of Western modernity and Enlightenment thought. Are we going to have an Islamic, indigenous, native identity? These three phenomena have given rise to very serious discussions on the nature of modernity, on cultural relativism, on how we can understand tradition, on the essential moral fabric of Eastern societies, etc. I think in that sense, the discussions in Iran are far ahead of, let's say, what is going on in Iraq. They are not, perhaps, as sophisticated as what goes on in intellectual circles in India, but by the standards of the Middle East, they are quite deserving of more attention than what has been paid to them so far.

What kind of misunderstandings and assumptions do Iranians have about the West, and how do they affect Iranians' views towards secularism and democracy?

I think it's fair to say that in the same way that we have a lot of stereotypes and misunderstandings about Iran, they have their own types of stereotypes and misunderstandings about what goes on in the West. For example, there are all sorts of stereotypes about the lack of spirituality in the West.

Every time I go to Iran, I have to keep reminding people that that's not the case, that spirituality and religion are still crucial to the average citizen in the West as well. Because of the lack of in-depth exposure to the day-to-day life of Westerners, people have false views of what is possible in Western countries. The notion that the streets are paved with gold and that you can just go and pick pieces up and so forth, those are the sort of misunderstandings that people have. Iranians in particular feel that the U.S. government has no other preoccupation than to just think about Iran and try to squeeze it in one way or another. You have to tell people that this is not what really goes on. Or regarding race relations in the U.S., there are quite exaggerated claims about the influence of Jewish lobbyists. As for secularism and democracy, it's hard to come up with a catch-all theory that explains everything. Among Iranians, reactions are different—Iran is a divided polity, after all, and you have many that look at democracy and secularism as the way to go. They see, for example, how this instrumental use of religion by the new political elite in post-revolutionary Iran has taken something away from the inner meaning, from the sanctity of religion, per se. So people are advocating for democratic and secular government. Pluralist sentiments, especially with the younger generation, are very much alive. And of course, then you have others who view democracy and secularism as nothing but Trojan horses that the West employs. They say democracy, human rights, and women's rights are just Trojan horses that the West attempts to use to deprive us of what is authentic, indigenous, and native to us.

How does the U.S. occupation of Iraq affect ordinary Iranians' view of the U.S. and thus U.S. policy towards Iran?

Well, again, not being there, it is hard for me to say. But judging from what I read in the paper and what I see on Iranian TV, certainly the U.S. presence is not something that people are too excited about. Reports about the unleashing of these sorts of ethnic and religious conflicts in the region, or the destruction of holy Shiite sites, or the geographical proximity and the ease with which Americans can basically violate Iranian airspace, or the daily barrage of reportage that you get of the killings of innocent Iraqis by American soldiers—even if they're accidental shootings and so forth—do not necessarily reassure people that the U.S. presence in Iraq is to their advantage. As the situation in Iraq has deteriorated, I think, so has the public mood in Iran in terms of viewing the U.S. presence in Iraq.

In Lebanon's The Daily Star, you wrote that it is difficult for the United States to work with domestic Iranian opposition because "there is hardly any agreement within the Iranian opposition on how to change the regime. For dissidents inside Iran, money or endorsements from the United States are the kiss of death." How can the United States engage Iranian reformists to effect change? Without a sole leader for the reform movement, like the role which ex-President Khatami played while in office, is reform currently possible?

I'm absolutely sure that any type of overt, direct support—for propaganda purposes, to reach out to Iranian reformists, or to beef up dissident movements as a way of regime change—is going to backfire. I think that's absolutely not the way to proceed. Frankly, my recommendation is a much less sexy type of policy. I would say that you need to engage Iran and enable it to open up economically. Allow it to enter the WTO. Fundamental economic reforms that further consolidate the economic power of the middle class are how you will be able to ensure the future prospects of a reformist type of movement, and frankly, the gradual mellowing of the Iranian political scene. The policies that the U.S. has pursued have been extremely short-sighted and counter-productive. I would say to try to support nongovernmental organizations, civil society organizations, etc.

Do not try to put a political tag on it. Being more receptive to and having more ties—cultural, political, economic—to Iran is what's going to pay dividends in the long-term, rather than what the U.S. has been doing for the last 30 years, which is a policy of sanctions and trying to impose deadlines and red tape that haven't amounted to much at the end of the day. But of course, I know my policies wouldn't go over well with the folks in Washington because they want short-term, sexy types of "solutions" where they can say: "Mission Accomplished." As an academic, I have the luxury of thinking long-term, and seeing how these things can be counter-productive in the long-term.

But won't economic support help Ahmadinejad? Much of the domestic criticism directed towards him deals with Iran's economic problems, especially its oil shortages and rapidly increasing inflation. That was the biggest issue during the recent parliamentary elections. Wouldn't the U.S. providing economic help to Iran strengthen conservatives instead?

That's a very good question. You see, in social sciences, we have the phenomenon of the law of unintended consequences. I think this is exactly one of those cases. You're right—the Achilles heel of the Iranian government, in many ways, is its handling of the economy. Right now, there are daily shortages of electricity in Iran, between two to four hours a day, even in Tehran. That should tell you that the economy is in shambles in many ways. There has been very little foreign direct investment in Iran; the aging infrastructure of the oil industry is in dire need of an infusion of money so that they can upgrade and update their equipment.

Iran needs to do much more by way of offshore drilling for oil, and it doesn't have the technology on its own to do this. So the point is, in the short-term, economic aid can help to improve the lot of Ahmadinejad and so forth, but the unintended consequence would be that in the long-term, you are trying to help the flourishing of a middle class, whose standard of living has deteriorated rather sharply in the last thirty years. If the literature of political science tells us anything about democracy building and class structure, this is the class that you really need to try to beef up. And again, I think it would be advantageous for the Iranians—they would get something out of this, infrastructure, help, etc., and I believe people would be sophisticated enough to know to what extent these benefits were accomplishments of the Iranian government and to what extent they were due to the initiatives undertaken by Western countries. So I wouldn't worry much about political milking of this issue if I were in Washington.