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Iran at the Crossroads

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Author

Pahlavi, Reza

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CSD Center for the Study of Democracy

Organized Research Unit
University of California, Irvine
www.democ.uci.edu



Dean Schonfeld, Professors Dalton and Petracca, the UC Irvine Department of Political Science, the Center for the Study of Democracy, the Student Host Committee, organizers, members of the faculty, students and guests, thank you all for inviting me and for your warm welcome here this evening.

There is much to be said, and a lot more to be done about the plight of the Iranian people and the issues facing my homeland today. Tonight, however, I will keep my comments limited to what I believe to be the most important challenges facing my countrymen on the eve of the eighth presidential drama—a drama written and conducted by the Clerical Regime in Iran in order to stage the perception of electoral legitimacy, for the exclusive consumption of western media and world public opinion.

In sixteen days, in a somber atmosphere marked by the closure of more than 40 newspapers, the arrest of nearly every single voice for freedom, and the banning of all opposing political parties and entities, Iranians are being asked to participate in what the

clerical regime is presenting to the world as "free elections." However, the results of the June 8th drama will not represent the people's true choice. That is why Iranians from all walks of life are today openly challenging the election's very legitimacy. Why? Because the clerical regime's approbating control over the electoral process is a mirror image of the methods used by the former Soviet Union in the last century.

Nevertheless, and in all probability, the regime will be able to use its enormous "powers of persuasion"—such as brute force and crushing social control—to force a substantial turnout. However, the fact remains that my countrymen are no longer beguiled by any promise of change and reform from this theocracy.

It is a simple reality that political candidates in Iran are exclusively confined to those selected and approved by the "Guardian Council"—the State organ tasked with the review, selection and ultimately the dictation of the regime's choice of candidates to the people. It is noteworthy that members of this 12-member "Council" are in effect appointed by one single man, Supreme Theologian Ali Khamenei, who handpicks half of the council members, while the rest are picked by the head of the judiciary—in turn, another personal appointee of "The Leader."

As a result, today Iranians are dying for meaningful reform—literally. They are imprisoned, tortured and murdered, to silence a growing cry for the very platform of reform that, ironically on this very day, four-long-years ago propelled Mr. Khatami into the Presidency.

Still, too many in the West fail to see the real picture and are quick to applaud any election, even a Soviet Union-style charade, as a sign of Iran's flourishing new democracy

and reform. While western news headlines have described the dynamics within Iran as a struggle between the "reformists" and "radical conservatives," the reality is truly far more complex.

The issue in Iran is not which faction of the Islamic Republic can meet the demands of the Iranian people, but rather what system other than a theocracy can save Iran.

After two decades of sustained crisis and clerical misrule, Iran's economy continues to be plagued by low confidence and mismanagement, widespread corruption, an overburdened public sector, and total dependence on a volatile oil market. In a country in need of nearly one million new jobs annually, only a fraction stand a chance. The Iranian economy is confronted with severe unemployment (more than 35 percent) and skyrocketing inflation (over 40 percent). According to the regime's own figures, 40 percent of the population lives under the poverty line: that is a total of nearly 30 million people who are desperately in need of real solutions for their real problems.

Yet, for 22 years the regime's method of addressing its chronic problems has been simple: blame the "Great Satan" and a world filled with "foreign enemies."

Big changes are coming, however. The Iranian people, especially the youth, comprising 70 percent of the population, are quick to point out that solutions for their social and economic ills lie in their own hands and begin with the need for dramatic and fundamental political change. To facilitate this change, the Iranian people need to be equipped with the best tools and weapons of modern politics: knowledge, access, communication and free dialogue.

The Clerical regime is now confronted with a new generation that has neither taken part in the revolution nor has shown any evident commitment to its ideals. The regime's greatest weakness lies in its inability to respond to the youth's demands for fundamental economic and political freedom, as well as the removal of cultural restrictions.

By any measure, dramatic change in Iran is inevitable. The only choice is whether it will occur peacefully, minimizing social disruption, or the regime continues crushing freedom seekers –thus, igniting violence and mass rebellion.

There was a time when the clerical regime's periodic, token and partial reforms masked its inherent incompatibility with the principles of freedom, democracy and civil society. Today however, for Iranians, the shine has worn thin on the "moderate reformers" who once smiled to the world and promised "reform" and "dialogue between civilizations," but for four-long-years delivered nothing short of pain, terror and death—to the very people who entrusted them with their hopes, dreams and votes.

I am here to tell you that the time has finally arrived to write a new chapter in the history of my homeland, a chapter that ends this brutal regime, and corrects the mistakes of the previous one too. Iranians seek a transparent political system in which full participation in free and fair elections are guaranteed, irrespective of political ideologies, religious beliefs or ethnic background.

The principle issues confronting Iranians today are basic and fundamental: freedom, self-determination, human rights, justice and economic opportunity. In short, objectives attainable under a secular democratic system.

In support of this quest, I have energized an effort calling for national unity among all groups dedicated to a democratic agenda and outcome to work together for a common cause—the establishment of a democratic and secular government.

My goal is to lead this movement culminating in a national referendum, beyond this regime, and with international observation, as a means to guarantee freedom and self-determination for the people of Iran.

My goal is simple, achievable and straightforward: I envision an Iran wherein its prosperous economy gives every Iranian an equal chance for hope and opportunity; an Iran where its women fully participate in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of their homeland; an Iran where its press is free from intimidation, harassment, imprisonment and torture; an Iran which will, in its version of a post-inquisition Renaissance, build its foundation on age-old Persian principles of tolerance and pluralism.

This vision includes a progressive, civil and stable society in which the separation of Religion and State is realized. Finally, the Iran of tomorrow will be best served by the pursuit of a foreign policy based on principles of harmony, trust and mutual respect.

An important part of my responsibility in this quest is to raise the level of international awareness over the real plight of my countrymen. In that light, I am also here to voice the expectations and demands my countrymen have from the world—especially from Western governments:

First, I ask that Western governments not forget that everyday in my country, basic human freedoms of speech, thought, press and assembly, taken for granted in the West, are brutally crushed. Not a day goes by without reports of new arrests, disappearances and

harassment of citizens, journalists and those with alternate points of view. The West must care, and not allow such acts go unchallenged.

Second, I ask that, in pursuit of economic opportunities in Iran, the West not lose sight of the demands, needs and fundamental rights of the Iranian people. Governments and business sectors alike bear a special responsibility to invest in the people of Iran, and not the brutal religious dictatorship ruling it. The West must care and not exclusively pursue business interests at the expense of human interests. Ultimately, investments in people far outlast investments in regimes—especially those in direct conflict with their own people.

Third, in support of the above, I urge western decision makers, as a precondition to lifting of sanctions or expanded economic ties with Iran, demand the observance of human rights by the clerical regime. Specifically, the regime must make measurable progress and meet realistic and achievable milestones such as:

- The immediate release of all student, journalist, political and religious prisoners
- The reversal of the ban on free press and opposing political parties
- The unconditional acceptance of a free and fair national referendum, supervised by international observers, as a means to guarantee freedom and self-determination for the people of Iran.

The ship of freedom has set sail in my homeland. The world must care, and make the right choice in favoring the winds that will give birth to a long-awaited secular democracy in Iran. The Iranian people deserve no less. This is a cause I believe in and am committed to see to fruition, even if it were at the expense of my own life.

I thank you for your attention, and stand ready to answer any of your questions.

Reza Pahlavi
University of California
Irvine, California
May 23, 2001

Reza Pahlavi is the son of the former Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Mr. Pahlavi is a graduate of the University of Southern California where he majored in political science. He has been active in attempting to bring democratic reforms to Iran, and has recently delivered major public addresses on political conditions in Iran at Cornell University and Georgetown University. He gave his address at UC Irvine as a guest of the Department of Political Science and the Center for the Study of Democracy.
