

Iran elections offer little hope for change

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We all have to look cautiously at Friday's parliamentary elections in Iran.

When Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997, Western pundits and media euphorically asserted that Iran would finally reform from within.

Exaggerated claims of Khatami's popularity notwithstanding, experts never ventured to ask: Why would any Iranian care to vote in a system that is anathema to democracy? Under Iran's political structure, any candidate, for any office, must pass many checkpoints, including ideological loyalty to the system and its supreme religious leader.

Despite Khatami's much-publicized promises to change the political system, few, if any, would deny that he has been an absolute failure. It is now clear that the absolute power lies with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

When the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in 1978, his first undertaking was a call for a referendum: "Islamic republic, yes or no?"

Of course, millions of Iranians had already voted "no" to the Shah's monarchy by taking their protests to the streets. But Khomeini insisted on an "Islamic republic," which he deliberately did not define.

Khomeini was in fact preparing the ground for his subsequent dictatorial interpretation and manipulation. Many political parties and organizations, later crushed, either boycotted the referendum or qualified their affirmative vote on the clarification of its framework.

However, the major violation of the principle of popular sovereignty came about when Khomeini suddenly decided to replace the much-expected and desired "Constitutional Assembly" with his creation of the "Assembly of Experts," consisting mainly of mullahs. Instead of elected representatives, this body was chartered to write the new constitution.

In the subsequent elections for the presidency and the parliament, Khomeini disqualified candidates from a variety of coalitions and political parties.

However, two major events --- the Iran-Iraq war and the U.S. embassy hostage affair in 1979 --- set the stage for a new development. An internal purge began and gradually expanded toward the center and included even the most loyal elements within the regime.

Many in the West characterized the exercise as the emergence of a power struggle between the "moderates" and the "hard-liners." This has continued to this day and has accelerated since Khatami took office.

Today, the regime is plagued with the deepest political crisis in its entire history. But we would be ill-advised to paint the schism as one over fundamental change.

True, there is infighting, but over who should get a bigger share of power and not over the Iranian people's fundamental freedoms. Regardless of their differences, both sides have time and again declared allegiance to the principle of the velayat-e faqih (absolute supremacy of clerical rule).

The system does not allow reforms, public debate or healthy political participation because it lacks an inherent element, popular sovereignty.

As a U.S. Senate resolution by Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and sponsored by U.S. Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.) states, the elections are "neither free nor fair" and are "fatally flawed."

The time has come for an internationally monitored referendum as the last chance for peaceful change in Iran.

The Iranian people are demanding a United Nations-supervised referendum on the establishment of a democratic system and regime change.

The U.S. government should heed the call by the U.S. Senate and "advocate a genuine democratic government in Iran that will restore freedom to the people of Iran, and will live in peace and security with the international community."