

The Changing Landscape of Party Politics in Iran -- A Case Study

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Iran went from being a single-party state under the monarchy to having close to 100 political parties in the months immediately following the country's 1979 Islamic revolution.¹ As the clerical revolutionary leadership consolidated its position it went after the more secular of these parties. The emergence of the Islamic Republic Party (IRP), which was established just 10 days after the collapse of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, can be seen in this context -- its main task was to rally supporters of Velayat-i Faqih (Rule of the Supreme Jurisprudent) in an organization that had a clerical leadership. The need for this party died out as the opposition organizations disappeared, and it also suffered from internal ideological disputes and political competition -- the IRP disbanded in May-June 1987.

A few parties continued their activities in the coming years, and new ones emerged as well. Parties truly took off after President Hojatolislam Mohammad Khatami's election in 1997 and his promotion of them. The triumph of a hardline candidate in the 2005 presidential election, however, is not a sign that the surge of parties associated with Khatami has come to an end. Indeed, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad is a member of a party -- Jamiyat-i Isargaran-i Inqilab-i Islami -- that has existed for less than a decade. This paper examines the emergence of this party and its role in Ahmadinejad's victory. This serves not only as a case-study on party politics on Iran, but it also provides insight on the political arrival of Iran's second revolutionary generation and what the future holds.

The role of parties in the Islamic Republic.

The existence of parties is codified in Iranian law.² Article 26 of the Islamic Republic of Iran's 1979 constitution permits the "formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities... provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic." A Parties Law passed in September 1981 specified what a political party is and defined the conditions under which it could operate, and it made the formation of a party dependent on getting a permit from the Interior Ministry. Article 10 of the Parties Law specified that a commission (the Article 10 Commission) of one Interior Ministry official, two parliamentarians, and two judiciary representatives would issue party permits and dissolve parties acting illegally. The

Parties Law was not really implemented until late-1988, when the Interior Ministry submitted to parliamentary pressure, and almost thirty organizations applied for permits in the following months.

During the 1980s and into the 1990s the main parties were primarily clerical. The conservative Tehran Militant Clergy Association (Jameh-yi Ruhaniyat-i Mobarez-i Tehran) actually predated the revolution. Members of this organization who were more reform-oriented created the Militant Clerics Association (Majma-yi Ruhaniyun-i Mobarez) in 1988. In 1996 the Executives of Construction (Kargozaran-i Sazandegi) was created to back then-President Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. This was a significant development because not only were the group's founders not clerics or ostentatiously Islamic in character, but it was technocratically-oriented and pragmatic ideologically.

Parties came into their own after the May 1997 election of a new president, Hojatolislam Mohammad Khatami, who was an advocate of their role in civil society, and a House of Parties was established in 2000 to create some sort of legal framework for party activities and to minimize differences between the parties.³ Yet Iranian officials acknowledge that their party system is far from perfect.

Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad Javad Haq-Shenas said when he was secretary of the Article 10 Commission that although there is party political activity in the country, "the system, as a whole, is not conducive to political parties."⁴ A House of Parties was established in 2000 to create some sort of legal framework for party activities and to minimize differences between the parties. Mohammad Hassan Ghaffurifard, head of the Parties House, noted that Iran has more parties than most democracies, their activities are obscure, and the public has little confidence in them.⁵ The Parties House, he added, "does not support the parties whose activities are insignificant." In meeting with Parties House officials in late-2004, President Khatami said they must interact more effectively with the country's political groups.⁶

More than 100 licensed political organizations currently exist in Iran, but many of them -- such as the Islamic Association of Veterinarians -- have no real political role. Moreover, individuals can be members of several organizations. In elections, furthermore, the parties do not field candidates. Rather, each party publishes a list of candidates that it backs. Yet the different parties in a faction rarely back identical candidates. Political parties in Iran, therefore, are in a very dynamic state.

Origins of the Devotees

Of the more than 100 registered political organizations in Iran, one that is rarely discussed is the Jamiyat-i Isargaran-i Inqilab-i Islami, roughly translated as the Islamic Revolution Devotees Society and known simply as the Isargaran. Isar is the Arabic word for altruism and, in the Iranian context, isargaran (plural of isargar) has fairly specific connotations. "Isargari technically means giving selflessly and isargar refers to someone who gives selflessly to a sacred cause, but now it has been adopted for a specific meaning, namely somebody who has sacrificed in the name of the Islamic revolution," Iranian scholar Farideh Farhi writes.⁷ The term is used officially as a reference to those who have given their own or a loved one's life defending the regime.

Given this provenance, the word isargaran is used frequently in Iran. There is the Party for Defending Devotees and the Constitution (Hezb-i Defa az Isargaran va Qanun-i Asasi), as well as a Devotees of Pure Mohammedan Islam (Sazeman-i Isargaran-i Islam-i Nab-i Mohammadi). In August 2004, the latter group distributed registration forms for volunteers to defend the sacred shrines in Iraq. An Assembly of Devotees (Majma-yi Isargaran) existed in the sixth legislature. There also is a state foundation that provides services to the families of those who gave their lives in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and to the former prisoners-of-war; it is called Bonyad-i Shahid va Omur-i Isargaran.

Working As A Party

Parliamentarian Hussein Fadai, who is from Shahr-i Rey in Tehran, is secretary-general of the Isargaran. Ali Darabi was his deputy until his replacement by Lutfollah Foruzandeh in October 2005. President Ahmadinejad is a founding member of the Isargaran, as is Economy and Finance Minister Davud Danesh-Jafari (who served in the fifth and seventh parliaments). Other prominent members are legislators Fatemeh Alia, Nafiseh Fayazbakhsh, and Mehdi Kuchakzadeh. Members in the media include the director of the hard-line daily Siyasat-i Ruz, Ali Yusefpur, as well as Bijan Moghaddam, who was appointed the director of Iran, the Islamic Republic News Agency's daily, in October 2005.

Mujtaba Shakeri, Hadi Imani, and Ahmad Moqimi are some of the other founding members of the Isargaran. Central council members elected in the February 2002 congress of the Isargaran, who are not identified above, are: Ali Ahmadi, Ali Mazaheri, Mohammad Mehdi Mazaheri, Ahmad Nejabat, Abol-Hassan Faqih, Seyyed Jalal Fayazi, Ahmad Moqimi, Abdul Hussein Ruholamini-Najafabadi, Alireza Sarbakhsh, Sediqeh Shakeri, Masud Sultanpur, and Mohammad Ali Taqavi-Rad.⁸

Most members of the Isargaran are veterans of the Iran-Iraq War, and the organization also includes disabled veterans, freed prisoners of war, the family members of martyrs (people who died in the war), and those who were involved in the revolution against the monarchy. For example, Secretary-General Fadai's younger brother, Mohammad, served in the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in northwestern Iran, and he lost his life during the campaign against Kurdish insurgents. Fadai himself was imprisoned for his revolutionary activities, and he served as a combat engineer during the war -- possibly with the IRGC. After the war, he continued as a military engineer -- apparently for the now-defunct Construction Jihad Ministry -- and then worked for the Oppressed and Disabled Foundation.

Election Competitions

According to some sources, the Isargaran began organized political activities in the year beginning March 1995, but the extent of its activities in the 1996 parliamentary elections is unknown. At least one of its founders was elected that year. According to a reformist newspaper, the Isargaran was founded on 3 February 1997.⁹

In the May 1997 presidential election, the Isargaran backed the conservative front-runner, Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nuri. Two years into Hojatoleslam Mohammad Khatami's tenure, in August 1999, the Isargaran issued a highly critical analysis of his presidency.¹⁰ The analysis noted a "lack of consideration for economic reform" and referred to unemployment, falling incomes, and a reduction in purchasing power. It accused the administration of replacing skilled managers with individuals not selected on the basis of merit. The analysis warned: "Social instability, growing acts of robbery and murder, social decadence, administrative corruption, and constant humiliation of the people in their day-to-day business dealings and a widening of the gap between the people's expectations and government policies have together created a deep crack which could culminate in a national crisis."

Isargaran unhappiness with Khatami continued, and the society issued another critique that dismissed presidential complaints about a lack of real power.¹¹ It said individuals who raise these complaints are doing so to settle political rivalries instead of concentrating on solving people's problems: "In circumstances in which society is being eroded by economic problems, and hardships, unemployment, drug addiction, discrimination, and corruption on various levels, which economic or social dilemma can possibly be resolved by focusing on the issue of whether or not the president should be given more authority?" The Isargaran worried that the constitution's checks and balances are in danger.

Reformists won control of the sixth parliament (2000-04), but approximately one-sixth of the victors were candidates backed by the Isargaran. Fadai said the Isargaran "did not take part in any coalition and was the only formation or political party whose lists consisted of principled persons loyal to the ideals of the Imam and the followers of the leader."¹² He continued, "Apart from Tehran, we presented 187 candidates, some of whom were also on other parties' lists; according to results announced up to noon yesterday, more than 50 of the Association's candidates have gained seats." A conservative newspaper reported that 42 Isargaran affiliates were elected.¹³

Regardless of these apparent gains, Isargaran warnings continued. In early 2001, the group announced that Iran was in danger of being subverted from within, as the efforts of foreign governments, counterrevolutionary groups, and elements within the ruling system converged.¹⁴ The repetition of American and "Yeltsinesque" reformist slogans are meant to deceive people, it said, and the legislators are being distracted from serving the public -- it referred to "popular issues," including "people's livelihood,...unemployment and other youth predicaments such as marriage and housing,...development,...security, being accountable,... respect for the law,... [and] the fight against poverty, corruption, and discrimination." A later Isargaran statement said that "extremists and the revisionist current" are preventing the legislature from doing its work.¹⁵

Fadai claimed that the United States is supporting the reformists.¹⁶ He urged "revolutionary forces and the genuine reformists" to adopt a resolute stance against these elements. Fadai continued: "America must be made to realize that among the revolutionaries who are firmly committed and loyal to the ideals of the Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini] and the Islamic revolution martyrs, there are no disputes and disagreements about the principles of preservation of independence, and the rejection of foreign domination and interference. Furthermore, it must be made absolutely clear that those who link their fates with the demands and aspirations of America can expect nothing but loss and harm in the future."

A Hard-Line Resurgence

Reformist domination of elected institutions seemed fairly complete after the 2000 parliamentary race, with control of the executive and legislative branches, as well as the municipal councils. The hard-liners did not give up, however, and turned their attention to the 2003 council elections. Indeed, it was at this time that the heretofore unknown Islamic Iran Developers Council (Etela'f-i Abadgaran-i Iran-i Islami) emerged, and 14 of 15 candidates whom it backed won seats in Tehran. The council then selected a mayor -- Isargaran founding member Mahmud Ahmadinejad -- on 29 April 2003.

The hard-liners then focused on the next election -- for the legislature in 2004. As part of the Coordination Council of Islamic Revolution Forces, the Isargaran backed 17 exclusive candidates, and it backed another 13 who had the support of other parties.¹⁷ Isargaran leader Hussein Fadai, furthermore, headed the Abadgaran election committee.¹⁸ Aided by the Guardians Council's rejection of most viable reformist candidates -- including more than 80 incumbents -- the Abadgaran fared well in that race, winning all the seats in Tehran and many more in other constituencies.

The Isargaran were not content with this situation, however, and set about trying to create an Isargaran faction in the legislature.¹⁹ Abadgaran leaders discouraged this in an effort to impose uniformity and the appearance of cohesion. When Hojatoleslam Nateq-Nuri addressed an Isargaran central committee meeting, he emphasized the need for unity among the hard-line forces.²⁰

Eyeing The Prize

The Tehran press began discussing Tehran Mayor Ahmadinejad as a presidential candidate in the summer of 2004, but he was such an unknown quantity at the time that other prospective candidates garnered much more media attention in the ensuing months. The Isargaran continued to work quietly during that time, but it issued a prophetic statement: "The more famous the candidates, the more their agendas will be overshadowed by their names, and consequently the destiny of the country will be the same as it has been up to now."²¹

But any illusions about unity and solidarity among the conservatives had been put aside. As of December 2004, there were at least five possible hard-line candidates, and as some stepped aside others took their places. When the more traditional Coordination Council of Islamic Revolution Forces -- which included the older organizations such as the Tehran Militant Clergy Association and the Islamic Coalition Party -- met in March 2005 and selected Ali Larijani as its candidate, Hussein Fadai of the Isargaran abstained from voting. Soon thereafter he created what came to be known as Coordination Council II, which considered others' candidacies.

The Isargaran eventually backed the candidacy of national police chief and former Revolutionary Guard Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, announcing that he won out over Ahmadinejad, Larijani, Ali-Akbar Velayati, Mohsen Rezai, and Ahmad Tavakoli.²² The Isargaran statement explained that all the candidates had the minimum qualifications, and it added that the Isargaran met with all the candidates to exchange views. The society pledged that it would depend on the outcome of public opinion polls to determine who would earn the most votes, and for that reason it chose Qalibaf.

This was a peculiar situation, with a party backing someone other than one of its founders. The move could be perceived as a Machiavellian political maneuver meant to deceive the competitors in the presidential race. Indeed, after his loss, Qalibaf complained of betrayal by his supposed supporters. The decision to back Qalibaf, furthermore, created splits in the Isargaran -- central council member Abol-Hassan Faqih left to lead Ahmadinejad's election headquarters, deputy-secretary general Ali Darabi joined Ahmadinejad's campaign, and Ali Ahmadi left to head Mohsen Rezai's campaign.²³

Regardless, the Isargaran backed Ahmadinejad in the second round of the election, when he defeated Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. The Isargaran announced: "Undoubtedly, our association will firmly support Mahmud Ahmadinezhad, a principle-ist candidate, who is the symbol of justice and honesty in action and words, and will full our religious and national duty."²⁴

What Does The Future Hold?

There appear to be real and continuing differences between Ahmadinejad and the group that he helped found. As the legislature considered the president's nominees for cabinet positions in August, the parliamentary presiding board supported the nominees. Isargaran and Abadgaran parliamentarians were reportedly the leading opponents because they did not have sufficient input on the candidates.²⁵ Four of the 21 nominees failed to win votes of confidence. When the legislature considered the four new nominees in early November, it approved three of them. In the face of intense criticism of his inexperience and his suspiciously amassed wealth, the nominee for petroleum minister withdrew his name from consideration just hours before parliament met to give its votes of confidence.

The Isargaran held its third major conference in early October, and the organization's provincial leaders and central committee members were in attendance.²⁶ The organization appears to be in a strong position -- members include the president and a member of his cabinet, parliamentarians, a Tehran council member (Masud Zaribafan), and a provincial governor (Seyyed Solat Mortazavi of Khorasan Razavi Province). Its role in having some cabinet nominees rejected shows that it is capable of mobilizing support and is becoming a political actor of some import. On the other hand, the growing distance between the Isargaran and Ahmadinejad suggests that it will not be a trouble-free process. Moreover, Isargaran member Mujtaba Shakeri said that the organization has yet to determine its relationship with the Coordination Council of Islamic Revolution Forces.²⁷

In broader terms, this case study highlights two important features of the Iranian political landscape. The first is that more than twenty-five years after the revolution the political system remains very dynamic and is therefore unpredictable. Under these circumstances, using historical examples, possessing a thorough knowledge of system's institutions and legal framework, and knowing the specific personalities are essential when trying to make sense of developments.

The second thing to bear in mind is that men like Ahmadinejad and organizations like the Isargaran represent a younger generation whose formative experience was the Iran-Iraq War and which wants a greater say in the country's affairs. These are not the clerics whose formative experience was resistance to the monarchy and then leading the country after the revolution, and who in some case have become very rich since coming to power. Ahmadinejad is a populist who in his campaign stressed anti-corruption and won praise for his modest lifestyle. In his foreign policy speeches during the campaign he stressed Third Worldism, and since then he has shown his disdain for the West and commonly accepted diplomatic norms. These are the people and the institutions that the world must deal with for the next two decades.

ENDNOTES

1 On early political conflicts in the Islamic republic, see Sharough Akhavi, "Elite Factionalism in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Middle East Journal*, v. 41, n. 2 (Spring 1987); Maziar Behrooz, "Factionalism in Iran under Khomeini," *Middle Eastern Studies*, v. 27, n. 4 (October 1991); and Cyrus Vakili-Zad, "Conflict among the Ruling Revolutionary Elite in Iran," *Middle Eastern Studies*, v. 30, n. 3 (July 1994).

2 On the legal background of parties, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic*, John O'Kane, trans., (London: I.B. Tauris), 1997, and Bogdan Szajkowski, ed., *Political Parties of the World*, 6th edition, (John Harper Publishing, 2005), pp. 307-309.

3 On the growing role played by parties in the country's politics, see Stephen C. Fairbanks, "Theocracy Versus Democracy: Iran Considers Political Parties," *Middle East Journal*, v. 52, n. 1 (Winter 1998); Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The Power Struggle in Iran," *Middle East Policy*, v. 7, n. 4 (October 2000); and Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

4 Iran, 16 September 2001.

5 Entekhab, 13 September 2003.

6 Islamic Republic News Agency, 3 November 2004.

7 Farideh Farhi, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation," in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of the War*, Lawrence B. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 115, fn7.

8 Jomhuri-yi Islamic, 6 March 2002.

9 Farhang-i Ashti, 9 June 2005.

10 Jomhuri-yi Islami, 26 August 1999.

11 Sobh, 5 December 2000.

12 Resalat, 21 February 2000.

13 Kayhan, 25 February 2000.

14 Resalat, 7 February 2001.

15 Resalat, 28 November 2001.

16 Resalat, 31 July 2002.

17 Iran, 16 February 2004.

18 Hamshahri, 27 May 2004.

19 Iran Daily, 9 June 2004.

20 Shoma, 30 September 2004.

21 Siyasat-i Ruz, 2 January 2005.

22 Siyasat-i Ruz, 30 May 2005.

23 Farhang-i Ashti, 9 June 2005.

24 Kayhan, 20 June 2005.

25 Etemad, 23 August 2005.

26 Iran, 2 October 2005.

27 Iranian Students News Agency, 17 October 2005.

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