

# The Gazette

## Ahmadinejad is not Iran

**West should be aware the president does not speak for his people**

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The media frenzy surrounding Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to New York has eclipsed the democratic struggle of the long-suffering Iranian people. The incendiary polemics to which he owes his infamy are the populist trickery of a failing authoritarian theocracy that seeks legitimacy in hate-mongering against contrived enemies rather than promoting the human rights and economic prosperity of its citizens.

Judging by his spectacular notoriety in the West, he has succeeded in stealing the show from the millions of Iranians languishing under his oppressive rule. He has also succeeded in giving more ammunition to hawkish elements in the Bush administration contemplating military action against Iran. In both cases, the losers are the Iranian people.

Ahmadinejad is neither the most powerful political figure in Iran, nor does he operate within a totalitarian state. Under the Iranian constitution, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is far more powerful than the president, and the radical faction that he leads is but one among competing political forces within the Islamic republic. While there are elections in Iran, candidates must be approved by the Council of Guardians - under the supreme leader's authority - based on their "Islamic" credentials.

When the reformer Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997 with 70 per cent of the popular vote, Iranians envisaged the long-awaited emergence of an open society. But conservative rulers created parallel structures that stymied change and persecuted the reformers, many of whom were murdered, tortured, imprisoned, exiled, or not allowed to run for public office in subsequent elections.

In the wake of the ensuing repression and disillusionment, Ahmadinejad, a relatively unknown political figure, was "elected" in 2005 on an anti-corruption platform that ousted the favourite candidate, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, perceived by many Iranians as a corrupt leader that has amassed a vast illicit fortune through control of the petroleum industry and other business interests.

While Ahmadinejad is seemingly beyond corruption, he has not been able to deliver on any of his promises to end corruption or improve the lot of the poor. Instead, he has focused on a policy of confrontation with the West to rally Iranians behind him. American cowboy diplomacy has strengthened Ahmadinejad's hand as he skillfully exploits Iranian nationalist sentiments.

The only realistic long-term solution to Ahmadinejad and the nuclear question is the democratization of Iran through a policy that isolates the hard-liners while empowering progressive Iranian movements. Seventy per cent of Iranians are under 30 years of age. They are post-ideological, well-educated, Internet-savvy, glued to satellite television, and desperate for hope; hope of a better future in an open, cosmopolitan and prosperous Iran. They care little about the Islamic revolution and have no memory of the Shah's rule.

They do not wake up in the morning fantasizing about the nuclear annihilation of Tel Aviv. As a matter of fact, most care little about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their primary concern is unemployment, inflation, corruption, cultural and political repression, in short, the decline of a nation that has the second largest oil/gas reserves in the world, is heir to a rich 2,500-year-old civilization, boasts a highly educated population with renowned filmmakers and intellectuals, and one of the most successful diasporas.

Iran is a modern and complex society that cannot be indefinitely ruled by terror and propaganda. The hard-liners are well aware that the biggest threat to their power is not U.S. imperialism, but rather, a "velvet revolution" from within which counts among its ranks thousands of students, labour unions, and women's organizations.

Witness the imprisonment of Iranian-Canadian philosopher, Ramin Jahanbegloo, or the recent imprisonment of 67-year-old Iranian-American scholar and grandmother, Haleh Esfandiari, or the scores of young bloggers, journalists and human rights activists who have been thrown in the torture chambers of Tehran, including Montreal photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, who was murdered in 2003. A government with legitimacy does not go to such desperate lengths to suppress dissent. And it is in this context that Ahmadinejad's bellicose rhetoric has to be understood.

Fearful of democratic change, the Islamic republic constantly seeks to stigmatize indigenous calls for reform as a U.S.-backed "foreign conspiracy." And a combination of hate-mongering and misinformation by the government-controlled media is intended to persuade people that they should remain loyal to their despotic rulers despite the ruin that they have brought to the nation. At a time of declining political fortunes, an apocalyptic confrontation with the West is exactly what Ahmadinejad needs to fashion himself as an Islamic saviour and thus perpetuate the rule of the hard-liners. And a diabolical Islamic madman is what U.S. neo-conservatives need most to agitate for yet another disastrous war.

At a time when meaningful dialogue is an urgent antidote to looming military conflict and further disintegration in the volatile Middle East, giving Ahmadinejad a privileged platform at the expense of the Iranian people only reinforces the myth of an inevitable clash of civilizations, rather than showing us a way to a better future.

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