



## Emigres in state eager to see changes in Iran

By George Moore, Record-Journal staff

06/17/2009

Seeing images of political strife in Iran from her Southington home, Behnaz Perri had one thought:

"I just keep on telling everyone, 'I wish I was there,' " she said. "I would be one of those people protesting against this government."

Perri left her native country in 1986 to escape a government that, she said, "doesn't let you breathe." Perri and her family practice the Bahai faith, a monotheistic religion that preaches unity. Bahais have been marginalized in Iran, which is an Islamic republic.

Perri has been watching clips on YouTube of crowds protesting the results of Iran's presidential election last Friday. One clip she found particularly moving. One of the protesters could be heard chanting, "Bahais, we will protect you."

Perri is hopeful the mass protest will create some changes within Iran, which, she said, melds church and state too rigidly. The same kind of popular energy that led to the Iranian revolution in 1979, she said, appears to be on the streets now.

Protesters are disputing the election results, in which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected over reformist challenger Mir-Hossein Mousavi by a margin of 63 percent to 34 percent. There are some aspects of the election that have raised concerns about fraud. Newsweek, for instance, reported on secret government polls in Iran showing that 16 million to 18 million favored Mousavi, compared to six million to eight million for Ahmadinejad.

Manchester psychiatrist Dr. Jamshid Marvasti, who emigrated from Iran in 1973, sees the protest movement, in part, as a generational struggle, not unlike what happens within families.

"Iran is run by old-fashioned clergymen," he said, "and now the majority of the population are young people below the age 30."

Young people, he said, now want a stake in government. Their mobilization on the streets, he said, is indicative of internal change, though it is not as broad-based as the uprising in 1979. At that time, all segments of society mobilized against the status quo, he said, including villagers and working-class people, who are visibly absent from today's protests. Marvasti said he is hoping for a gradual transition in which the new generation will take the reins of government.

But Dr. Ramin Ahmadi, a Woodbridge physician who emigrated from Iran in 1982, argues in a Forbes.com commentary piece that "the Islamic Republic we have known for the last three decades is gone."

"This is not about Mousavi anymore. ... This is a revolution and it is about overthrowing the Islamic Republic," he said Wednesday.

Ahmadi said the government predetermined that Ahmadinejad would be the victor and provided false election results. He said the country could go in one of two directions: either Ahmadinejad holds on to power using military might or the reform movement gets a foothold and brings about major transformations.

While the strife is attention-grabbing, Iranian-American Dr. Ali Shakibai, of Manchester, cautioned against jumping to conclusions about what's happening in Iran. Outside involvement with Iran's affairs, he said, would only complicate the conflict. Just as no one interfered with the controversial Bush-Gore election in 2000, he said, Iran should be able to resolve its problems independently.

"We should try to be honest in our dealings with the world," said Shakibai, who immigrated to the United States in 1966.

Observers like Renee Redman have been tracking alleged human rights abuses against the protesters.

"We are watching human rights abuses unfolding right in front of our eyes," said Redman, executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center in New Haven, which was co-founded by Ahmadi.

Because Iran has clamped down on foreign media coverage, Redman has been monitoring incidents through Web sources such as blog accounts and Twitter. Press accounts indicated that at least seven have been killed in demonstrations, she said.

Additionally, the government reportedly has been arresting lawyers and human rights workers on flimsy pretenses, she said.

The mass protests are the culmination of a "continuing disagreement" within Iran about the future of the country, said Jeremy Pressman, associate professor of political science at the University of Connecticut. While the more conservative elements form the pillars of government, there has been a growing reformist movement over the last 15 years, he said.

But there are people even within the establishment who have come out in support of Mousavi, he said.

"The protests right now are a mix of people who are part of the establishment and people who are fed up with the regime and feel that vote rigging took place," he said.

Pressman said there are questions about voting irregularities, though it is too early to say what happened. Ahmadinejad, he said, does have an appeal to many Iranians. His populist economic policies, Pressman said, appeal to working-class voters, while his fiery nationalism garners respect from others.