

Not All Elections Are Worthy of the Name

Sorry, John Kerry and Chuck Hagel. Just because Iran holds elections doesn't mean that its government represents the people.

BY JEFFREY GEDMIN

In November 1990 Guatemalans went to the polls, determining that for the first time in decades the transition of power from one elected civilian government to another would take place at the beginning of the new year. I was an election observer. I recall being flown aboard a small, rickety propeller plane into a mountain village where we landed on a grassy field. A short car ride later we found ourselves at a polling station in breathtaking beauty. What really took your breath away, though, were the hundreds of Mayan farmers (Mayans represented at least half of Guatemala's nine million population at the time) lined up single file in the warm sun, waiting for hours to cast their vote.

Elections matter. That's why it raised eyebrows when Secretary of State John Kerry recently said that Iran has "a government that was elected" and Chuck Hagel, in his confirmation hearings for Secretary of Defense, similarly contended that Iranians have an "elected legitimate government." Elections alone don't make for democracy, but there are no democracies without elections and governments of all stripes seem to crave the legitimacy that flows from the ballot box.

Francis Fukuyama has wisely observed that people often care as much about dignity and honor as they do about things like territory or food. Not long before his death in 2011, Christopher Hitchens recounted in *Slate* the story of a friend

meeting an Arab acquaintance for dinner who became apoplectic when he discovered that Albanians had enjoyed reasonably fair and free elections. "What does that make *us*? Are we peasants? Children?"

Yes, Iran has elected government. But as John Kerry and Chuck Hagel surely know, not all elections are created equal.

Communist East Germany, officially known as the German Democratic Republic, had elections that included four different political parties that campaigned alongside the SED, the Socialist Unity Party that actually ran the country. North Korea has a multi-party system today. Cuba had its most recent elections last month -- though the same ruler has remained in power for 55 years running. There's a body of academic literature on how elections work in authoritarian countries. In the book *Everyday Stalinism* by University of Chicago Professor Sheila Fitzpatrick, one finds the sentence, "During the Soviet elections of 1929, conducted under the slogan of class war, more people were deprived of the vote than ever before." Yes, Stalin actually held elections.

How do elections work in Iran? For starters, not very well. Iran's head of intelligence recently acknowledged that his services are currently conducting "heavy monitoring" of the populace in advance of the country's Presidential elections scheduled for June. In the country's last elections on June 12, 2009, nation-wide protests erupted amid wide-spread allegations of fraud. The so-called Green Movement was born. Its slogan was simple: "Where is my vote?"

The Iranian government had sensed trouble back then as well. In the run-up to the 2009 election authorities blocked access to Facebook. They jammed international broadcasters like the BBC, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Voice of America.

They slowed down internet access and on election day interrupted mobile phone communications.

The Green Movement as such didn't last very long. After the election, hundreds of protestors and civic leaders across the country were imprisoned. Two prominent Iranian opposition leaders, Mir Hossein Musavi and Mehdi Karroubi, both candidates in the 2009 election, were harassed and eventually placed under house arrest. Iranian Nobel peace prize laureate Shirin Ebadi was forced into exile.

What about this time? As in the past, the Supreme Leader's Guardian Council, a group of 12 theologians, will vet candidates for the election. The process will exclude "reformists, liberals, individuals who are not in line with the Islamic establishment, and women," says Golnaz Esfandiari, the Iranian human rights reporter and curator of the blog Persian Letters. At the same time, the government appears to be pursuing a deliberate strategy aimed at ratcheting up the climate of intimidation and fear, according to Denise Ajiri, another Iranian journalist and founder of Iran Election Watch, a site covering the upcoming presidential election. Musavi's two daughters were arrested last month in Teheran. At least 17 journalists have been jailed in the last six weeks.

I recall meeting in Europe in summer 2010 the brother of an Iranian journalist friend, a Teheran-based engineer who described himself to me as having been previously thoroughly apolitical -- or at least until the disputed 2009 elections and the ensuing wave of repression. He told me that he and his friends had been left feeling furious and humiliated by government actions. In 1990 in the Guatemalan hills when I asked a poor farmer through an interpreter why he was waiting hours in line to vote, he responded simply, "How else do I get to have my voice heard?"

Elections matter.

In a 2002 essay in *Journal of Democracy*, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way sought to distinguish between democratic and authoritarian approaches to elections. According to the authors, democracies must have: 1) executives and legislatures selected through open, fair and free elections; 2) virtually all adults permitted to vote; 3) political rights and civil liberties, including freedom of press and freedom to criticize the government without fear of reprisal; and 4) elected authorities who are not subject to control by the military or clerical leaders.

When John Kerry and Chuck Hagel talk about elections and legitimate government in Iran, what exactly do they have in mind?

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