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Recommended Citation

Griffin '12, Hannah, "IWU Student Travels to Iran for 2009 Elections" (2009). *News and Events*. Paper 397.
<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/397>

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October 26, 2009

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IWU Student Travels to Iran for 2009 Elections

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The Iranian presidential election was a topic of international discussion and dispute this summer. The election garnered worldwide attention, especially after protestors took to the streets of Iran disputing the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Information about the election was limited for international observers. All foreign press was expelled from Iran during the election. While the election proceedings were closed to the rest of the world, Illinois Wesleyan University junior Sara Ghadiri was able to spend the summer in Tehran and witness first-hand the election fervor.

Ghadiri, whose father was born in Iran, claims dual-citizenship and was therefore able to vote in the presidential elections. As a political science major, Ghadiri was excited by the amount of political activism that occurred in Iran during the election. “People of all convictions, all social classes and all beliefs came to the polls. I was so amazed to see the mass turnout, what ended up being over 70 percent of the eligible voting population,” said Ghadiri.

Iranian citizens also became active in the campaign process. “Pre-election, I can tell you that the atmosphere was absolutely electric. There were people in the street every night handing out posters and flyers,” said Ghadiri, “So many people were involved in campaigning that it was impossible to walk down the street in Tehran without seeing someone handing out literature, a newspaper or a green piece of ribbon or cloth.” Green was the color of Mousavi’s campaign advertisements, while Ahmadinejad chose red.

Ghadiri collected many of these campaign materials and brought them back with her to the Illinois Wesleyan campus in order to analyze them. “My research is still in data collection phase now. I have collected, cataloged and translated everything I brought back,” said Ghadiri. Her ability to read and speak Farsi, the official language of Iran, has

been helpful in her analysis of campaign materials. “I am now working on a thesis synthesizing my research. I have been working with both Professor Jim Simeone and Professor Kathleen Montgomery on the project, so it's still evolving,” said Ghadiri.

Interestingly, Ghadiri noted that the Iranian presidential candidates used campaign slogans that were variants of President Barak Obama’s popular slogan, “Yes We Can.” “All of the opposition candidates ran on slogans about change, and none more than Mousavi, the main opposition candidate, whose movement in many ways mirrors the Obama youth galvanization,” said Ghadiri.

Mousavi was most popular among the young and educated. Running on a reformist platform, Mousavi promised economic rejuvenation, increased personal rights and reestablished ties with the West. Many believe that Ahmadinejad’s attitude towards foreign relations and “his hard-line stance on issues like the nuclear program have hurt the public image of Iran and Iranians,” said Ghadiri.

Ahmadinejad does have considerable support in Iran, however due to flaws in the transparency of the Iranian election process many believe election fraud occurred. In fact, other presidential candidates resigned their posts with the Iranian government out of protest. Protests by the people occurred most on city streets; it was known Ahmadienijad was unpopular in the cities and yet he still won the cities. This led to the public cry: “where is my vote?”

The election protests affected Ghadiri and her family during their stay in Tehran. “Protests started with marches down main avenues and calls for recounts. The next day, my family left for the mountains because my dad was afraid they would get violent and might end up being dangerous for anyone with dual citizenship,” said Ghadiri.

As for the political future of Iran, Ghadiri says it is a tough thing to foresee. “I hope that there is indeed reform in politics in Iran. It would be fantastic to see Iran rejoin the international community as a functioning, friendly nation in the international community,” said Ghadiri, “It is clear that there is public pressure for change, but it remains to be seen whether or not it will happen soon.”

For additional information on her time in Iran, visit Ghadiri’s blog at www.sara-ghadiri.blogspot.com.

