

Between Tel Aviv and Teheran

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of Iranian citizens pour into the streets in order to protest against their government! What a wonderful sight! Gideon Levy wrote in Haaretz that he envies the Iranians.

And indeed, anyone who tries these days to get Israelis in any numbers into the streets could die of envy. It is very difficult to get even hundreds of people to protest against the evil deeds or policies of our government – and not because everybody supports it. At the height of the war against Gaza, half a year ago, it was not easy to mobilize ten thousand protesters. Only once a year does the peace camp succeed in bringing a hundred thousand people to the square – and then only to commemorate the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

The atmosphere in Israel is a mixture of indifference, fatigue and a “loss of the belief in the ability to change reality”, as a Supreme Court justice put it this week. A very dramatic change is needed in order to get masses of people to demonstrate for peace.

FOR MIR-HOSSEIN MOUSAVI hundreds of thousands have demonstrated, and hundreds of thousands have demonstrated for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. That says something about the people and about the regime.

Can anyone imagine a hundred thousand people gathering in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to protest against the official election results? The police would open fire before a thousand had assembled there.

Would even a thousand people be allowed to demonstrate in Amman against His Majesty? The very idea is absurd.

Some years ago, the Saudi security forces in Mecca opened fire on unruly pilgrims. In Saudi Arabia, there are never protests against election results – simply because there are no elections.

In Iran, however, there are elections, and how! They are more frequent than elections in the US, and Iranian presidents change more often than American ones. Indeed, the very protests and riots show how seriously the citizens there treat election results.

OF COURSE, the Iranian regime is not democratic in the way we understand democracy. There is a Supreme Guide who fixes the rules of the game. Religious bodies rule out candidates they do not like. Parliament cannot adopt laws that contradict religious law. And the laws of God are unchangeable – at most, their interpretation can change.

All this is not entirely foreign to Israelis. From the very beginning the religious camp has been trying to turn Israel into a religious state, in which religious law (called Halakha) would be above the civil law. Laws “revealed” thousands of years ago and regarded as unchangeable would take precedence over laws enacted by the

democratically elected Knesset.

To understand Iran, we have only to look at one of the important Israeli parties: Shas. They, too, have a Supreme Guide, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who decides everything. He appoints the party leadership, he selects the party’s Knesset candidates, he directs the party faction how to vote on every single issue. There are no elections in Shas. And in comparison with the frequent outbursts of Rabbi Ovadia, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a model of moderation.

ELECTIONS DIFFER from country to country. It is very difficult to compare the fairness of elections in one country with those in another.

At one end of the scale were the elections in the good old Soviet Union. There it was joked that a voter entered the ballot room, received a closed envelope from an official and was politely requested to put it into the ballot box.

“What, can’t I know who I am voting for?” the voter demanded.

The official was shocked. “Of course not! In the Soviet Union we have secret elections!”

At the other end of the scale there should stand that bastion of democracy, the USA. But in elections there, only nine years ago, the results were decided by the Supreme Court. The losers, who had voted for Al Gore, are convinced to this very day that the results were fraudulent.

In Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and now, apparently, also in Egypt, rule is passed from father to son or from brother to brother. A family affair.

Our own elections are clean, more or less, even if after every election people claim that in the Orthodox Jewish quarters the dead also voted. Three and a half million inhabitants of the occupied Palestinian territories also held democratic elections in 2006, which former President Jimmy Carter described as exemplary, but Israel, the US and Europe refused to accept the results, because they did not like them.

So it seems that democracy is a matter of geography.

WERE THE election results in Iran falsified? Practically no one of us – in Tel Aviv, Washington or London – can know. We have no idea, because none of us – and that includes the chiefs of all intelligence agencies – really knows what is happening in that country. We can only try to apply our common sense, based on the little information we have.

Clearly, hundreds of thousands of voters honestly believe that the results were faked. Otherwise, they would not have taken to the streets. But this is a quite normal among losers. During the intoxication of an

election campaign, every party believes that it is about to win. When this does not happen, it is quite sure that the results are forged.

Some time ago, Germany's excellent 3Sat television channel broadcast an arresting report about Tehran. The crew drove through the main street from the North of the city to the South, stopping frequently along the way, entering people's homes, visiting mosques and nightclubs.

I learned that Tehran is largely similar to Tel Aviv at least in one respect: in the North there reside the rich and the well-to-do, in the South the poor and underprivileged. The Northerners imitate the US, go to prestigious universities and dance in the clubs. The women are liberated. The Southerners stick to tradition, revere the ayatollahs or the rabbis, and detest the shameless and corrupt North.

Mousavi is the candidate of the North, Ahmadinejad of the South. The villages and small towns – which we call the “periphery” – identify with the south and are alienated from the north.

In Tel Aviv, the South voted for Likud, Shas and the other right-wing parties. The North voted for Labor and Kadima. In our elections, a few months ago, the Right thus won a resounding victory.

It seems that something very similar happened in Iran. It is reasonable to assume that Ahmadinejad genuinely won.

The sole Western outfit that conducted a serious public opinion poll in Iran prior to the elections came up with figures that proved very close to the official results. It is hard to imagine huge forgeries, concerning many millions of votes, when thousands of polling station personnel are involved. In other words: it is entirely plausible that Ahmadinejad really won. If there were forgeries – and there is no reason to believe that there were not – they probably did not reach proportions that could sway the end result.

There is a simple test for the success of a revolution: has the revolutionary spirit penetrated the army? Since the French Revolution, no revolution has succeeded when the army was steadfast in support of the existing regime. Both the 1917 February and October revolutions in Russia succeeded because the army was in a state of dissolution. In 1918, much the same happened in Germany. Mussolini and Hitler took great pains not to challenge the army, and came to power with its support.

In many revolutions, the decisive moment arrives when the crowds in the street confront the soldiers and policemen, and the question arises: will they open fire on their own people? When the soldiers refuse, the revolution wins. When they shoot, that is the end of the matter.

When Boris Yeltsin climbed on the tank, the soldiers refused to shoot and he won. The Berlin wall fell because one East-German police officer refused at the

decisive moment to give the order to open fire. In Iran, Khomeini won when, in the final test, the soldiers of the Shah refused to shoot. That did not happen this time. The security forces were ready to shoot. They were not infected by the revolutionary spirit. The way it looks now, that was the end of the affair.

I AM not an admirer of Ahmadinejad. Mousavi appeals to me much more.

I do not like leaders who are in direct contact with God, who make speeches to the masses from a balcony, who use demagogic and provocative language, who ride on the waves of hatred and fear. His denial of the holocaust – an idiotic exercise in itself – only adds to Ahmadinejad's image as a primitive or cynical leader.

No doubt, he is a sworn enemy of the state of Israel or – as he prefers to call it – the “Zionist regime”. Even if he did not promise to wipe it out himself, as erroneously reported, but only expressed his belief that it would “disappear from the map”, this does not set my mind at rest.

It is an open question whether Mousavi, if elected, would have made a difference as far as we are concerned. Would Iran have abandoned its efforts to produce nuclear weapons? Would it have reduced its support of the Palestinian resistance? The answer is negative.

It is an open secret that our leaders hoped that Ahmadinejad would win, exacerbate the hatred of the Western world against himself and make reconciliation with America more difficult.

All through the crisis, Barack Obama has behaved with admirable restraint. American and Western public opinion, as well as the supporters of the Israeli government, called upon him to raise his voice, identify with the protesters, wear a green tie in their honor, condemn the Ayatollahs and Ahmadinejad in no uncertain terms. But except for minimal criticism, he did not do so, displaying both wisdom and political courage.

Iran is what it is. The US must negotiate with it, for its own sake and for our sake, too. Only this way – if at all – is it possible to prevent or hold up its development of nuclear weapons. And if we are condemned to live under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear bomb, in a classic situation of a balance of terror, it would be better if the bomb were in the hands of an Iranian leadership that keeps up a dialogue with the American president. And of course, it would be good for us if - before reaching that point - we could achieve, with the friendly support of Obama, full peace with the Palestinian people, thus removing the main justification for Iran's hostility towards Israel.

The revolt of the Northerners in Iran will remain, so it seems, a passing episode. It may, hopefully, have an impact in the long run, beneath the surface. But in the meantime, it makes no sense to deny the victory of the Iranian denier.