

PROBLEM SOLVER

Billionaire Berlusconi advises struggling student to marry rich

Italian conservative leader Silvio Berlusconi has come under fire after telling a student she should marry a millionaire to solve her financial woes. "You should perhaps look to marry a millionaire, like my son, or someone who doesn't have such problems," the perma-tanned media tycoon turned politician told 24-year-old Perla Pavoncello. "With that smile of yours, you could even get away with it." The comment



attracted criticism from Italy's unions and from Walter Veltroni, Mr. Berlusconi's opponent in next month's election, which Mr. Berlusconi is tipped to win. "There are a lot of things you can joke about, but the problems in Italy's economy are not among them," Mr. Veltroni said. Youth unemployment runs as high as 40% in areas such as Naples. *Forbes* magazine estimates Berlusconi's fortune at around \$18.2-billion. *Agence France-Presse*



Pakistanis torch a Danish flag on Thursday to protest the publication of drawings of the Prophet Mohammad in 17 Danish dailies. Muslims are being advised to "just ignore" the upcoming film *Fitna* that is expected to condemn Islam.

Young Iranians refuse call to vote

HARDLINERS' BALLOT

BY DAVID BLAIR

TEHRAN • Iran's Supreme Leader cast his vote in parliamentary elections yesterday and, in his solemn and severe dark robes, told his compatriots that taking part was their "national and religious duty."

Yet millions of Iranians appeared to be registering a silent protest against the regime by ignoring Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's plea.

Polling stations across Tehran were quiet, orderly and only sparsely attended. One virtually empty polling station in a mosque pointedly declined to say how many people had voted by 3 p.m. "You are not allowed to know that," said the official in charge.

After about 90% of reformist candidates were banned from contesting the election, Iran's 70 million people — two-thirds of whom are under 30 — were left to choose between an array of hardline conservatives.

State television devoted hours to exhorting people to vote, with one official feeling

confident enough to proclaim a "glorious" response. But early signs suggested the turnout might equal the 52% registered in the last election, in 2004.

This compares with turnouts exceeding 80% in the presidential polls of 1997 and 2001, both won by Mohammed Khatami, a reformist cleric.

A low turnout would rob the contest of legitimacy and signal the quiet but persistent discontent of millions of young Iranians. Early results are expected tomorrow.

At Tehran University, a polling station was devoid of students and served a modest procession of elderly men.

Nearby, a preacher told an audience at prayers that the United States was hoping for a low turnout.

"Bush is interfering in Iran and asking people to stay away from the election. But Mr. Bush, look and see that the Iranian people are voting," he said, before leading vigorous chants of: "Death to America!"

The Ayatollah, who usually stays above the political fray, effectively endorsed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in remarks published just before the vote.

Iranians should consider "voting for those who can pave the way for the current government," he said.

Reformists seeking political and social change had aimed to capitalize on public discontent about inflation, now 19%.

"Not only will I not vote, I will stop others from voting. The price rises are driving me mad," said shopkeeper Jalal Fasihi when asked if he would join last-minute Tehran voters.

The Daily Telegraph, with files from Reuters

Film criticizing Koran set for release

Dutch braced for backlash

BY MARK TREVELYAN
in London

Is Europe learning any lessons from a series of harsh collisions between free speech and the religious sensibilities of Muslims?

The next few weeks may provide an answer, as the Netherlands gears up for the release of a short film, expected to be fiercely critical of Islam, by right-wing politician Geert Wilders who has called the Koran a "fascist" book.

Past experience is not encouraging: In 2004 a young Dutch Islamist stabbed to death a director who had made a film attacking the treatment of women in Islam. Danish newspaper cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad — one showing him with a bomb in his turban — provoked a wave of Muslim anger around the world in 2006 and is still simmering today.

The Dutch are taking no chances — last week they raised their terrorism alert level for fear of an Islamist attack in response to Mr. Wilders' film.

Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende yesterday said he has warned European leaders of a possible backlash against European interests. "We will keep each other informed about the situation so that when the movie comes out we can all speak with one European voice," Mr. Balkenende said.

Security analysts say the government has a key advantage this time around: It has known about the film for months and has used that time to reach out to the Muslim community at home, as well as conducting diplomacy abroad. "The most important lesson

that came out of Denmark was you have to have established channels of communication with the Muslim community in your country. It's important [Muslims] are issuing calls for calm and making sure this doesn't escalate," said Peter Neumann of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence in London.

Local imams and Muslim youth workers are among those the authorities have cultivated, said Edwin Bakker of the Clingendael Institute, a think-tank in the Netherlands.

"There's a lot of prevention going on," he said. "They already have people, movements, organizations representing Muslims to come out with statements saying: 'Keep dignified, don't give [Mr. Wilders] the chance to make a success out of it.'"

That is precisely the advice to Dutch Muslims of Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss academic and one of Europe's most prominent Muslim intellectuals.

Mr. Ramadan says he does not expect a new crisis on the scale of the Danish cartoons affair, but the risk is that the film could split society in a way that would suit the purposes of both Mr. Wilders and Islamic extremists.

"For Wilders, this is exactly what he wants ... he wants polarization. Islam is not compatible with the West and our values" — this is what he's saying. And [Osama] bin Laden, this is exactly what he wants," Mr. Ramadan said. "My advice [to Muslims] is take an intellectual critical distance towards this. Say, 'We don't like it,' but go ahead and just ignore it."

Despite the tensions, there are some positive signs. The affair has helped fuel interest in Islam among the rest of the Dutch population, with more

visits to mosques by non-Muslims and a higher quality of media debate, said Bob de Graaff of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

"One can never rule out the possibility that a small group or loner may commit an act of violence related to the film," he said. "But I myself am rather confident such an act this time would no longer have the same long lasting effects" as such past crises as the 2004 killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh.

The Dutch government has used tactical means to reduce the fanfare surrounding the film, called *Fitna*, telling Mr. Wilders he will have to pay the security costs himself if he wants to promote it with a news conference. As no broadcaster has agreed to show it, it is expected to be released on the Internet on March 28.

Some analysts believe, however, the bigger challenge for the Dutch may be to manage fallout from abroad — protests have already begun in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In the Danish cartoons case, protests spread rapidly around the world, with trade boycotts, attacks on Danish embassies and violent demonstrations in which at least 50 people were killed.

"It became extraordinarily difficult to contain the genie and there was no way they were able to control that ... So I think the Dutch are a bit over-optimistic that they have laid all the groundwork," said Magnus Ranstorp, a security expert at the Swedish National Defence College.

The Wilders affair will not be the last to test European nations on potential clashes between free speech and Islam, Mr. Ranstorp said. "There are going to be more crisis events."

Reuters

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For information or to register, please call Hyla Reichmann
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