

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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Iran After the June 2005 Presidential Election

Introduction

Haleh Esfandiari, Director, Middle East Program

As part of its series on Iran, the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in collaboration with the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, hosted two meetings on the ninth Iranian presidential election. The first meeting, on May 23, 2005, focused on the politics of the election campaign; the second, on July 7, 2005, analyzed the outcome of the election and its implications for the future. The proceedings of the first meeting can be accessed on the Middle East Program's website, www.wilsoncenter.org/middleeast. This publication brings together the papers presented at the second, post-election meeting.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in June 2005 caught observers both in Iran and abroad by surprise. The election was basically a five-man race (a sixth can-

didate was not a serious contender). The conservatives, unable to achieve consensus on a single candidate, fielded two men: Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, a former member of the Revolutionary Guards, and, until he resigned the post on the eve of the campaign, the chief of the Tehran police; and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran and a civil engineer by training. The reformist camp also ended up with two candidates: Mostafa Moin, a former Minister of Science, Research and Technology (formerly known as the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education), and Mehdi Karrubi, a cleric and a former Speaker of Parliament. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the chairman of the Expediency Council, ran as the pragmatic centrist. Rafsanjani, also a former Speaker of Parliament, had already served two previous terms as president (1989-1997).

Analysts almost universally expected a close contest between Rafsanjani and Moin, and

hardly focused on the other candidates. Iranian law requires a second round of balloting if no candidate wins over 50% of the vote in the first round. Each of the eight previous presidential elections was decided in the first round. On this occasion, most analysts expected Rafsanjani to win in the second round, if not in the first. During the campaign, Moin promised to continue the reformist policies of outgoing president Mohammad Khatami. Rafsanjani suggest-

ed he would be the man to repair relations with the United States, bring negotiations with the Europeans on Iran's nuclear program to a successful conclusion, and spur economic growth. Ahmadinejad ran on a populist platform, criticizing the elites he claimed had monopolized wealth and power, and promised expanded opportunities for the little man. Karrubi's campaign also had populist overtones; he promised a handout of around \$65 per month to every

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program continues to concentrate on long-term developments and their impact on political and social structure, economic development, and relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of long-term political, social, and economic developments in the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts programs on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

- **Current Affairs:** The Middle East Program emphasizes analysis of current issues and their implications for long-term developments in the region, including Arab-Israeli diplomacy, Iraq and its neighbors, political participation, globalization, technology transfer, U.S. foreign policy, economic and political partnerships, and the impact of developments in Central Asia and the Caucasus.
- **Gender Issues:** The Middle East Program examines employment patterns, education, legal rights, and political participation of women in the region. The role of women in advancing civil society, the problem of trafficking in women, and the attitudes of governments and the clerical community toward women's rights are areas to which the Program devotes considerable attention. The Program also has a keen interest in exploring women's increasing roles in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction activities.
- **Islam, Democracy and Civil Society:** The Middle East Program monitors the growing demand of people in the region for democratization, accountable government, the rule of law, and adherence to international conventions on topics such as human rights and women's rights. It continues to examine the role of Islamic movements in shaping political and social developments and the variety of factors that favor or obstruct the expansion of civil society.



adult Iranian. Qalibaf, in an expensive campaign, tried to appeal to Iran's youth and middle class as the strong man who would get things done.

The reformists came to the elections in a weakened state. They had suffered a severe setback in the 2002 local council elections, when conservatives won in all major cities, allowing Ahmadinejad to become mayor of Tehran. They also lost their majority in Parliament to the conservatives in the 2004 general election—thanks to the Council of Guardians, which disqualified hundreds of prominent reformist candidates. Yet, they believed that Iranian voters would still rally around the reformist candidate and against Rafsanjani.

The first round took place on June 17 and the second a week later on June 24. On both occasions, as has happened frequently in the past, voting hours were extended to accommodate all who wished to vote. Turnout in the first round stood at 63% of eligible voters, considerably lower than the more than 80% who came to the polls to vote for Khatami in 1997. In the first round, as expected, Rafsanjani came in first with 21% of the votes, but it was Ahmadinejad who came in second, with 19.5%, followed closely by Karrubi and then, at some distance, Qalibaf closely trailed by Moin. Karrubi alleged irregularities in the voting, as did Moin, suggesting that the security forces influenced voters and improperly intervened in the election. The Council of Guardians ordered a token recount of one hundred ballot boxes and announced that no irregularities had taken place.

Between the first and the second rounds, Ahmadinejad's campaign gained momentum. His posters appeared everywhere; he came on national television and gave interviews and press conferences. The pundits still assumed Rafsanjani would win. Iranian voters, they believed, would choose a seasoned politician, no matter what baggage he was carrying, not a novice. Rafsanjani continued to employ the language of reform and moderation while Ahmadinejad emphasized his poor and humble background and focused on alleviating poverty, creating jobs, and fighting the corruption of what he called the "oil mafia."

Ahmadinejad's populist platform and his attention to the concerns of ordinary voters paid off. Voters gave the unknown mayor of Tehran seven million votes more than Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani's implied promise to reach out to America or to conclude a deal with the EU did not resonate with voters. Neither his warning against "extremism," nor Karrubi's dire prediction that Rafsanjani's defeat would bring a Taliban-like government to office, greatly impacted voters. It turned out that for the majority of voters, bread and butter issues (the high price of everyday goods, affordable housing, inflation, jobs and opportunity) matter far more than foreign policy issues. Ahmadinejad's talk about de-westernizing culture and returning to the social values of the early days of the revolution didn't frighten away voters: it won him votes.

The speakers at the July 7th meeting examined the short-term and long-term implications of Ahmadinejad's election on domestic and foreign policy.

Siamak Namazi, currently a visiting public policy scholar at the Wilson Center, analyzed the election in terms of voters, voting patterns, and campaign promises. He noted that Iranian presidential elections have frequently proved unpredictable. In this election, even Ahmadinejad's people never expected him to win. Ahmadinejad and Karrubi had both stressed economic justice—an issue closer to the concerns of Iranian voters, Namazi said. He described Ahmadinejad as a member of the "second generation" of the revolution and predicted that he and his team will run the government on the basis of a populist program. He also discussed the expectations of the voters from the new president, analyzed the strengths and the shortcomings of Ahmadinejad, and noted that he will face limitations, as did his predecessor. The new president, Namazi explained, will have little say in foreign policy or power over the judiciary and the military—areas which are the prerogative of the Supreme Leader.

According to Farideh Farhi from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the election "clarified the political map of Iran." The

Iranian electorate is divided, she said, and voters do not necessarily follow their leaders. They decide for themselves and are not averse to change. They elected a reformist for two consecutive terms and now decided to elect a conservative as their president. She predicted changes in government personnel in both in the capital and provinces. The biggest challenge facing the centrist technocracy and the middle class professionals lies in their ability to moderate Ahmadinejad and his team, and to prevent statist policies—a return to the 1980's when the state played an expanding role in the economy and everyday life.

Mohammad Takhshid from Tehran University examined the likely relations between the Parliament, which is dominated by the conservatives, and the new president who belongs to the same camp. He emphasized the role that the Leader and the Expediency Council play in shaping the relationship between the legislative and executive branches.

The Expediency Council serves as the arbitrator between the two branches, while the Leader has the ultimate say on all major decisions taken by either branch. The current Parliament did not cooperate with outgoing President Khatami and his government. For example, the Parliament attempted to use no-confidence vote to oust a number of Khatami's ministers from office—although it was prevented from doing so by the Leader. Takhshid predicted that Parliament and the new government will see eye-to-eye on economic issues, matters relating to foreign investment, and on a stricter line on social freedoms won by Iranians in the last several years.

Hadi Semati, a professor of political science at Tehran University and currently a public policy fellow at the Wilson Center, described Iran's foreign policy as sophisticated and complex, and one directed by a number of knowledgeable diplomats. He thought it unlikely that the foreign policy system in place could be easily dismantled. He predicted that Ahmadinejad may adopt a tougher line, but

that there would be no sharp break with existing foreign policy. Ahmadinejad will continue negotiations with the EU, improve relations with Iran's Persian Gulf neighbors, support the Jaafari government in Iraq, and pursue expanded relations India and China. However, Ahmadinejad's presidency could usher in a change in "style and vision," and this could impact foreign policy, Semati said.

Shaul Bakhash, Clarence Robinson of History at George Mason University, noted that Ahmadinejad did not campaign on foreign policy issues and that little is known about his foreign policy views. During the campaign, he emphasized that relations with the U.S. are not "high among his priorities." He thought Iran's team was not tough enough in its negotiations with the EU. He thought Iranian resources should be exploited by Iranians, not foreign firms. Although these attitudes suggest a more isolationist policy, Bakhash expected continuity in Iran's foreign policy. Major foreign policy issues, he noted, are the prerogative of the Leader. He noted that the character of relations with the U.S. would be determined not only by Tehran but also by Washington, and Bush Administration policy towards Iran has been characterized by a mixture of hostility and fuzziness. The danger is that a more uncompromising stand on Iran will encourage a hardline stand on America's part, dimming prospects for a rapprochement between the two countries.

Karim Sadjadpour, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, also analyzed the election results. They indicate, he concluded, that young populations will not necessarily vote for reform or for the candidate who promises to initiate talks with the U.S. He noted that Ahmadinejad did not talk about establishing relations with the U.S., democracy, or liberalization; yet, his populist campaign resonated with the voters. Young Iranians seek reform, Sadjadpour said, but they wish to avoid "unrest, insecurity, and uncertainty." Iranians no longer consider Iraq as a "paradigm for change."



The Iranian Presidential Elections: Who Voted, Why, How & Does it Matter?

By **Siamak Namazi**, Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Iranian elections since 1997 have had one consistent theme: they have defied the wildest predictions, shaming analysts who dared venture a guess regarding the results. On June 17, 2005, some 63% of Iran's 47 million eligible voters showed up to vote. The only prediction that proved true was that this would be the Islamic Republic's first two-round presidential election, and that former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would come in first in the initial round. But no one predicted the second round would be between Rafsanjani and Tehran's hardline Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, nor that Ahmadinejad would win in a landslide.

A series of questions come to mind when we look at these results: Why do we see such a discrepancy between the final results and the polls taken just hours before the elections? Why did so many Iranians come out to vote this June, while there was a clear trend toward apathy evident in the last two national elections (the Local Councils and Majlis in 2003 and 2004, respectively)? Could there have been foul play? What was Ahmadinejad's secret to success in these elections?

Why Such High Turnout?

Regardless of whether or not some foul play took place in favor of a particular candidate, which will be addressed below, it is obvious that the real turnout was considerably higher than analysts expected. The main factors driving the more than 60% of eligible voters who participated include the following, though in the absence of proper exit polling it is impossible to weigh each factor:

1. The Iranian society's continued desire to bring about change through gradual evolution rather than radical upheaval;
2. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decision to reverse the Guardian Council's ruling, thereby allowing Mostafa Moin, the main reformist candidate, to run. This move put a candidate in the race who could draw many domestic opposition votes (i.e., people who would have otherwise just boycotted the elections);
3. Rafsanjani's risky decision to stand in these elections, a decision which injected a lot of excitement and brought in not only his supporters, but also his staunch opponents;
4. The Moin camp's decision to team up with the Freedom Movement of Iran to form a national coalition for freedom and democracy, which again broadened the appeal for voters to come to the polls;
5. Former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karrubi's campaign promise to give all Iranians over 18 years of age nearly \$60 per month if he were to become president also played a role in attracting voters to the polls. Surely many voters thought this promise was a lie, when in desperate economic conditions, they did not lose anything by voting for him;
6. Demographic factors. Young voters tend to be more eager about voting. Iran's large youth population and the low voting age in Iran (15) meant that there were close to seven million eligible first-time voters (15-19 years);
7. Poor performance of outside opposition, particularly through broadcasts from the Los Angeles-based television stations. Their outrageous and ridiculous broadcasts reminded many voters that there is no viable "Choice B" and that they have to make do with the hand that they are dealt;
8. Statements coming from the White House also helped draw Iranians to the voting booth. U.S. President George W. Bush's comments were aired repeatedly, and although he did not specifically say so, view-

Final Results (Round I) (20 June update by the Ministry of Interior)

Candidate	Votes	Percent of total
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	6,179,653	21.01%
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	5,710,354	19.48%
Mehdi Karrubi	5,056,686	17.28%
Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf	4,075,189	13.90%
Mostafa Moein	4,069,699	13.83%
Ali Larijani	1,716,081	5.94%
Mohsen Mehralizadeh	1,289,323	4.40%
Blank/void ballots	1,287,440	4.17%
Total votes	29,318,895	100.00%
Eligible voters	46,786,418	
Voter turnout	62.66%	

From a PowerPoint presentation by Siamak Namazi.

ers were told that the American President was calling for a boycott. For a few, the “foreign interference” factor was enough impetus to go to the polls. More importantly, a number of intellectuals also felt that if the participation level dropped, the neoconservatives could mistake that for a cry from the Iranian people that they want to be “freed” à la Iraq. So, showing up and voting was also important in protecting Iran from potential U.S. belligerency;

- There is traditionally a group of “scared” voters. It is no secret that some Iranians worry that they might be turned down from a governmental job or a loan, for example, if their identity papers do not display a stamp showing that they participated in national votes. This group is more likely to cast a blank ballot than other voting blocks are.

Was There Foul Play?

There are two chief complaints being lodged by various persons and organizations:

- The main accusation is that the paramilitary *basij* (volunteer militia) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) were used to mobilize votes in the last minutes in favor of Ahmadinejad;
- There are also complaints by both Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad that there was defamation through the use of illicit newsletters distributed at night, and SMSes sent to cell phones.

All sorts of other allegations and rumors exist, including a number of cases of voters casting a ballot more than once. Nevertheless, it is nearly impossible to imagine that cheating could have taken place at a level that could bridge the big gap between the votes cast for Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad in the second round. Keep in mind the multiplicity of competing power centers watching over each other and the fact that besides the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council, each candidate is allowed to have his own representative at the voting centers and during the ballot counting. Moreover, even institutions like the IRGC and the *basij* are not entirely controlled by one person, and could not have possibly been at the sole disposal of a single candidate.

Ultimately, like it or not, we must accept that Mr. Ahmadinejad was truly able to send a message that appealed to the majority of Iranian voters and brought him to office.

What Was Ahmadinejad's Secret to Success?

The shock of the first round results polarized society in advance of the second round. The reformists, who up until this point opposed Rafsanjani, switched positions and rallied behind him out of fear of an ultra-conservative government. Many intellectuals and secular Iranians that had previously stayed out of the elections were now determined to vote, albeit not for Rafsanjani as much as against Ahmadinejad.

Despite the rallying call and the new voters who stepped into the elections game to block an Ahmadinejad victory, voter turnout in the second round actually dropped from 63% of eligible voters to just below 60%. It appears

that a lot of the voters who had voted for a reformist candidate in the first round did not vote in the second round. Many could not support Rafsanjani, no matter what. Others were simply too upset at the hypocrisy of the reformist parties who U-turned overnight regarding the former president.

Ahmadinejad's supporters, on the other hand, were energized by the initial results and redoubled their efforts to mobilize votes, using mainly the *basij* and parts of the IRGC, as well as the many local councils controlled by the *Abadgaran* faction, with which Ahmadinejad is affiliated. While Rafsanjani also commands a respectable network throughout the country, he was unable to compete with the effectiveness of the *basij*, at least at the speed required between the two rounds of elections, held one week apart. It's important to note that while the *basij* was accused of being the source of many irregularities during the polling, its impact was chiefly concentrated on mobilizing voters rather than carrying out any direct fraud.

During the second round, it became even clearer that the key issue for a significant section of society was the economy and the perceived injustice and mismanagement of it. It appears that for many it was a choice between Rafsanjani, who symbolized a pattern of economic injustices—both personally and through structural adjustment policies during his two term presidency (1989-1997)—and Ahmadinejad, who symbolized a simple, common citizen, who could understand the difficulties faced by the masses.

As mayor, Ahmadinejad had gained a Robin Hood-like reputation. A good example is his creation of low-interest marriage loans to the needy. He created this fund by eliminating “frivolous” budgets for top managers, such as those for redecorating offices.

Ahmadinejad's election on a platform of social justice, anti-corruption, and government efficiency suggests he was successful in presenting himself as the anti-establishment candidate to many voters who are fed up with the perceived mismanagement and corruption in government. Thus, in addition to his ultra-conservative supporters, he was able to tap into a large

Final Results (Round II)

Candidate	Votes	Percent of total
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	17,248,782	61.70%
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	10,046,701	35.93%
Blank/void ballots	663,770	2.37%
Total votes	27,959,253	100.00%
Eligible voters	46,786,418*	
Voter turnout	59.76%*	

** based on 17 June statistics*

From a PowerPoint presentation by Siamak Namazi.

pool of economically disillusioned voters, as well as anti-Rafsanjani votes. Many voters expressed the desire to see “new faces” in a regime where a handful of people have been recycled in cabinet posts for over two decades.

What Does It All Mean?

The main lesson of the overall results of the presidential election is that Iran is undergoing a sociological shift. The voting pattern shows the population moving away from reformist themes such as the growth of civil society and democratization, and towards a focus on economic stability. This phenomenon also explains why both Ahmadinejad and Karrubi did so much better in the first round than anyone expected.

The Ahmadinejad victory represents the start of top-level involvement of the second post-revolutionary generation in Iran's executive politics. This is a generation whose experience was shaped by the Iran-Iraq War, an event that gives them self-confidence, a sense of defiance, and a profound distrust of the West.

Given Ahmadinejad's recent entry into high-level politics in the Islamic Republic, little is known about his policies. But in general terms, for Ahmadinejad and his close associates, social justice trumps values such as personal liberties and democracy. Emphasis is put

on the need for decentralization of the state bureaucracy and empowerment of the provincial governors. They believe that the government should put national wealth at the service of the masses and not the economic elite, while they also cry out against the existing rampant corruption. In foreign policy, they insist that Iran must deal with the outside world from a position of strength and not weakness. They want to empower national industries and to see foreign investment curtailed at a minority stake. For them, it is time to give the younger forces of the country—albeit, not all of them, but rather the “trusted” few—a chance to implement the needed change.

We must understand that Ahmadinejad will face a variety of restrictions as president, restrictions which will limit his ability to execute this vision. These include being bound by the guidelines of the Supreme Leader and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in foreign policy and the 4th Five-Year Plan and the 20-Year Perspectives in economic policy. Furthermore, other issues, such the realities posed by the country’s demography, power structure, etc., that will no doubt play a big role in any future administration’s policymaking.

In the end, we need to wait and see what this new president does before judging him. The first big clue will come in his cabinet selection.

What Does the Ninth Presidential Election Say about Iranian Politics?

By Farideh Farhi, University of Hawaii at Manoa

If the 7th and 8th presidential elections revealed the depth of popular support for the reform of the political system, the two rounds of the 9th presidential election clarified the political map of Iran.

A comprehensive interpretation of election results is perhaps premature. Nevertheless, the way the campaign was conducted as well as the immediate results allow for some preliminary generalizations about Iranian politics.

First and foremost is the evolving relationship of the Islamic state with the Iranian populace. Both the campaign and results suggest that the Iranian state and contending political players take the electoral and everyday behavior of the Iranian populace seriously, and at least partially adjust in order to placate, appease, or address their aspirations and demands.


A good example of this adjustment was manifested in the campaign slogans for the presidential election. Only two candidates were willing to identify with the past revolutionary legacy. One was Mostafa Moin, whose campaign poster identified Mohammad Mossadeq, Ayatollah Mohammad Taleqani, Mehdi Bazargan, and Ali Shariati, not Khomeini, as his companions. The other was Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad, who claimed the simple life of the assassinated President Mohammad Ali Rajai as his inspiration despite protests by the latter’s widow.

More importantly, all candidates ran on a platform of change. Conservatives (or *Osulgarayan*—which literally means fundamentalists—as they preferred to call themselves during the campaign) relentlessly critiqued the past 16 years of the Islamic Republic. The reformists continued their talk of reform, and even Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the one candidate whose name is literally synonymous with the Islamic Republic, talked about being a different president than he had been in the past.

Ultimately, Ahmadinejad, and his anti-corruption, pro-Islamic, simple way of life message, garnered a landslide in the second round, but with less than 37% of eligible voters. In conjunction with the way the votes were split in the first round of election, this number reveals a **second** often neglected point about Iranian politics: the divided nature of the Iranian electorate.

The Iranian electorate does not operate in an almost herd-like fashion, moving from one direction to another in consort. They are incor-



rectly stereotyped as homogenous: first revolutionaries, then martyrs of war, then reformists, then disaffected reformists, then anti-reformists, then people with democratic aspirations, and now seekers of economic justice.

The reality is that the Iranian citizenry, like elsewhere, is a rather differentiated lot with important crisscrossing splits in terms of socioeconomic background, cultural practices, provincial and ethnic ties, and political aspirations.

The decision on the part of major political players inside Iran, including some of the opposition, to participate and not boycott the election should be seen more as a choice necessitated by this majority desire rather than an attempt to shape it. Moreover, the decision on the part of all candidates, to accept the results as the “will of the people” and see their defeat mostly in terms of their own organizational weakness must also be seen as part and parcel of a “reality check” that this election has hammered home.

The **third** revelation of this election is the possibility that competitive politics in Iran may not be as different as people have claimed from competitive politics elsewhere. Candidates with local ties did well in their own provinces, and candidates with better grassroots organization were skillful in both moving people to vote, bullying opponents, instigating violence, using media resources, and in all likelihood, some election-day vote fraud.

Ahmadinejad was bumped into the second round on the basis of the very organized and coordinated support of about 10% of the electorate. In this sense, what makes Iran’s election politics different from competitive politics elsewhere is not necessarily the behavior of those who have managed to be organized and develop resources, but the failure of other political forces to cultivate matching skills and capital.

Still, despite this patent unfairness of the process, the **fourth** revelation of this election is a confirmation of the fact that elections actually do matter in Iran, but not necessarily in terms of reshaping the nature or structure of the political system. They matter in terms of the possibility of unexpected results, important changes in policy direction, and changes of political cadres. If

the promises and alliances of this election are to be taken seriously, Iran may witness significant efforts to bring about change in distributive policies as well as economic priorities along similar lines to those already partially witnessed with the conservative victory in the 7th Parliamentary elections. The extent to which powerful economic forces, including the ones lodged within the state itself, will resist these changes is of course yet to be seen.

There will also be significant changes in terms of personnel manning the leadership of important government ministries. Again, these dynamics make Iran very similar to other countries with competitive elites in which elections rarely signify change in the power structure of the country but often herald shifts in policy direction and personnel.

Given this competitive environment, a **fifth** point this election confirms yet again is the fallacy of treating the Iranian political landscape as completely dominated by single individuals or unified groups. This fallacy is something that should be particularly avoided now. No doubt, conservatives have now managed to take over all key institutions of the Islamic Republic, elected or unelected. But their political cadres were unable to reach an agreement over a single candidate during the election, and there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the most organized of the cadres shifted allegiances from one conservative candidate to another just a few days before the first round of elections. As such, the expectation that forces that could not agree on a candidate will now begin to act in a cohesive and unified manner in the policy realm seems unwarranted. To be sure, the question of lack of agreement about a candidate and lack of coordination between the unelected and elected government institutions was solved by the Iranian voters. But the basic conflicts and dilemmas that exist within the Iranian polity remain.

At this point, Ahmadinejad’s supporters may not have thought through the domestic and international implications of his win. We will have to wait to see how the state bureaucracy, run mostly by career technocrats and contending political players, will respond.

Ahmadinejad ran on an anti-corruption, pro-justice, anti-establishment/elites platform while remaining totally committed to individuals who personify the establishment and in many ways, along with others, have been responsible for the policies pursued and corruptions ensued. At this point, it is by no means clear how he and his euphoric supporters can overcome this basic contradiction beyond expanding government's social welfare policies made possible by high oil prices. Such policies, pursued in the 1980s (facetiously called "couponism" for the coupon-based subsidies they provided to the population), and their remnants continue to be extremely difficult to bring under control. Expansion of these

policies will not solve the unemployment problem and will certainly be inflationary. It will scare off foreign investment and antagonize domestic investors and the bazaar.

A new game has begun in Iran. In the last 8 years, we watched how the political forces of reform were continuously thwarted by unelected institutions. Now we have to watch to see whether the Iranian middle and upper classes, the technocratic forces that inhabit state bureaucracies, and opposing political forces have the capacity to moderate Ahmadinejad and his cohorts' self-proclaimed fundamentalism, populism, and state welfarism. My bet is that they are not as helpless or hapless as they are being portrayed these days.

Ahmadinejad and the Parliament

By **Mohammad Takhshid**, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran University, Iran

Iran's factional politics have seen many surprises during the 26 years since the founding of the Islamic Republic. In May 1996, many Iranians, among them scholars and politicians, believed that the then conservative Speaker of Parliament Ali Akbar Nategh Nuri would be the clear winner of the 7th presidential election. Mohammad Khatami, by contrast, was a relatively unknown candidate who headed Iran's National Library and ran on an agenda of reform, beating Nuri with 69% of the votes.


The elections in June 2005 saw a similar upset. Here, the largely unknown, hard-line conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad surprised even his own supporters by beating the well-known Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the runoff election, winning on a conservative agenda quite different from that of his reformist predecessor Khatami.

Before examining the relations between President-Elect Ahmadinejad and the 7th Parliament, let us discuss the role of Parliament in the Iranian political system and existing factions in Parliament, as well as the issues most likely to cause friction between the president and Parliamentarians.

The Parliament in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in contrast to many Parliamentary systems, is not dominated by blind ideological allegiance to the president; nor does Parliament dissolve itself when the majority party loses that majority in Parliamentary elections. The Parliament acts independently of the president, serving as a dynamic and vibrant institution that challenges the executive branch on many important issues.

Contrary to other Parliamentary systems, there are two external actors who influence relations between the executive and legislative branches in Iran: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Expediency Council, headed by Hashemi Rafsanjani. The majority in the 7th Parliament is receptive to the views and orders of the Spiritual Leader.

In May 2004, a conservative Parliament replaced a reformist one. The new members of Parliament openly questioned cabinet members, requesting a wide range of changes in the composition of ministries and the replacement of reformist deputy ministers with conservative ones. The ministers who resisted were ousted from office through a vote of no confidence by



conservative members of Parliament. The first such case was Ahmad Khoram, minister of Roads and Transportation. When the members of Parliament began the same process with the education minister, Ayatollah Khamenei sent a letter to the speaker of Parliament and called for a halt to the Parliamentary proceedings. Members of Parliament brought no further motions against the cabinet members.

Potential disputes between the president-elect and Parliament are likely to center on foreign policy, the economy, culture, social issues, political reforms, and the approval of cabinet ministers.

Until the 6th Parliament, much of Iran's factional politics had been dominated by two powerful political unions of *ulama* (communities of religious scholars): the *Jame-Ruhaniyate-e mobarez* (Militant Clergy Association) and the *Majma-e ruhaniyun-e mobarez* (Society of Combatant Clerics). The *Jame-Ruhaniyate-e mobarez*, considered the "Islamic Right." Its platform includes less government involvement in economic affairs, privatization of the economy, and adherence to a stricter interpretation of Islamic law, especially in social and cultural issues. The *Majma-e ruhaniyun-e mobarez* were considered the "Islamic Left." Its views include more government involvement in the economy and the passage of laws—such as a land reform bill—to guarantee a more equitable income distribution. It also favored a looser interpretation of Islamic law. Members' views on domestic and foreign policies were more radical and revolutionary than those of the Islamic Right.

In Parliament, therefore, there existed two main political factions, the Right and the Left, as well as a small number of independents. After Khatami came to power in 1996, different political parties and associations with varying views were born, and a younger generation among both factions sought more political power and influence.

The 7th Parliamentary election was very controversial. The Guardian Council rejected the credentials of many candidates including more than 80 reformist members of the 6th

Parliament. In protest, the two major reformist parties, the Islamic Participation Party of Iran and the Islamic Revolution's Mujahideen Organization (IRMO), did not participate in the election. The conservatives, who had lost three of four national elections, were better organized with new faces, new ideas, and new slogans; they took advantage of the situation and soundly defeated the reformists.

Since May 2004, the majority in the 7th Parliament has adopted a conservative approach. They confronted reformist agenda of the government in several areas including economics, foreign policy, and socio-cultural issues. Regarding the economy, influential members of the conservatives—including Mohammed Khoshchreh, Hussein Sobhaninia and Ahmad Tavakkoli—have advocated populist economic policies and passed legislation to prevent any increase in the price of gasoline, electricity, water, or other government services. This has caused budgeting problems and also made it difficult for the government to pursue its privatization and investment policies. In the area of foreign policy, even though the head of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Commission is the more moderate Aladdin Boroujerdi, the *Abadgaran* faction has pursued a more hard-line policy on issues such as Iran-U.S. relations, negotiations with Europe, and nuclear policy. On socio-cultural issues, the conservative majority has sought to oppose the liberal policies of President Khatami in areas such as publications, art, and cultural events. Some of the most vocal critiques of Khatami's socio-cultural policies are Mohammad Reza Faker, Emad Afroogh, and Mehdi Kouchakzadeh.

The 7th Parliament, dominated by conservatives consists of three loose factions. First: the majority "*Osulgara*" faction, which is conservative and numbers about 190-200; second, a 40 member reformist minority faction; and lastly, the independent faction, which includes 70 or 80 members. The views of the latter group are closer to those of the majority faction.

It should be mentioned that the majority faction consists of two separate political alliances: the older generation of the Right (more traditional, moderate conservatives) and

the new generation of the Right (the “*Abadgaran*,” more radical conservatives). Each of these two conservative factions has 90-100 members in Parliament.

Predicting President-Parliament Relations

Since the views of the newly elected president are not well known, it is extremely difficult to make a viable prediction of his interactions with Parliament on important issues. However, the first and most important issue that is likely to dominate the interaction of the president and the Parliament is the economy. Ahmadinejad’s proposed economic policy (more equitable income distribution and the closing of the gap between rich and poor) won him most of his votes. Most of the members of Parliament share his economic views. Most of the high ranking and influential deputies (such as Ahmad Tavakkoli, Elias Naderan, and Mahmood Khoshchereh) were among the more vocal critics of the economic policies of Rafsanjani and Khatami and attacked the privatization and investment policies of the past 16 years. They argued that those policies had helped the upper class more than the poor and working classes.

Since Khoshchereh, the chair of the Parliament’s Economic Affairs Committee, is the top economic advisor to Ahmadinejad, there is not likely to be much friction between Parliament and the new President. It is, however, possible that reformists, independents, and some moderate members of the majority faction will form a strong and vocal minority in opposing populist economic policies and calling for the continuation of privatization.

With regard to increased foreign investment in Iran, neither Parliament nor Ahmadinejad are vocal advocates of such a policy. The 7th Parliament passed laws in the past year making foreign investment more difficult. These laws had a notable effect on the government contract with the Turkish company Turkcell and the proposed expanded Iranian cell phone network (Turkcell’s share fell to less than 50%). Management at Turkcell is considering abandoning the project. Ahmadinejad’s views in this regard appear similar to those of Parliament.


With regard to social and cultural issues, there are many similarities between Parliament’s position and that of Ahmadinejad. The majority of parliamentarians opposed the social and cultural policies of the Khatami government. They wanted more control over the newspapers, publications, and the film industry. Recently, it voted for an investigation of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance on the grounds that the ministry was not in tune with conservative principles and that its policies were not in accordance with those of the Islamic Republic. The conservatives also discussed a national dress code and criticized the universities for being too liberal. They demanded further Islamization of universities.

Looking at Ahmadinejad’s views and his work during the past two years as mayor of Tehran, there are no major differences between his social and cultural views and the policies pushed by Parliament.

With regard to foreign policy, major issues at the center of discussion and of controversy focus on relations with the United States and the European Union, nuclear policy, and human rights. Again, with regard to these issues, there are many similarities between views of the Parliamentary majority and those of the elected president.

On foreign policy issues, the Parliament is not eager to pursue a policy of closer ties with the U.S. or in many areas with the EU. Many hard-liners like Rafat Bayat were frequently critical of the government and the negotiators during the three-power talks with Europe (France, England, and Germany), accusing them of acting from a weak position. Bayat introduced a bill requiring a harder line vis-à-vis the EU. Parliament also passed a bill requiring the government to support efforts to obtain peaceful nuclear technology.

In contrast to presidential candidates who talked about closer Iran-U.S. relations, Ahmadinejad largely ignored the issue. With regard to nuclear policy, he made a controversial statement that the Iranian delegation in these negotiations with the EU is in a weak position and is intimidated by the other side (the EU and the U.S.). With regard to human rights, he



agrees with Parliament as seeing the debate as one meant to put pressure on Iran, believing there are no human rights violations in Iran.

With this in mind, we can expect little conflict between Parliament and the elected president on major policy issues such as economic, social, culture, and foreign policy.

One final note is that since about 120-140 members of Parliament supported Rafsanjani's candidacy before the election, and more than 100 of them went to his office after his defeat to convey their support for him. It is very like-

ly that a strong minority of reformists and some conservatives might oppose the extreme policies of the new government.

It is too early to make a sound prediction about the nature of the Parliament and Ahmadinejad's relations with it. However, examining Parliamentary trends over the past year and comparing these with Ahmadinejad's views from the election campaign, there will not likely be major disputes between Parliament and the new government, which will be sworn into office on August 3.

Regime Change in Tehran: The Direction of Foreign Policy in a Post-Khatami Presidency

By **Hadi Semati**, Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran University, Iran

The victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran's June 25, 2005 runoff election caught almost everybody by surprise. Despite irregularities preceding the election and the unfairness of the electoral process because of the Guardian Council's interference in vetting candidates, the massive turnout surpassed everybody's expectations. Usual irregularities of such a large scale election would not in any way change the result of the runoff election. However, one can credibly argue the possibility of Mr. Mehdi Karroubi's having replaced the president-elect in the final competition of the second round had the conservative establishment not mobilized all its instruments of persuasion and manipulation to support Ahmadinejad's candidacy. Ultimately, one thing is clear; no degree of ballot-rigging could alter the landslide victory of Ahmadinejad in the final battle for the votes.

The consequences of this election on Iran's foreign policy are not yet apparent and may prove to be as astonishing as the election itself. It is not clear how the president-elect of the Islamic Republic will position himself within the minefield of the Iranian factional politics. It is equally unclear how the shock of this particular election, which led to a distinct polarization of the public as well as the elite, might reshape the conservative faction. The foreign

policy team that Ahmadinejad will assemble is currently unknown, and his lack of experience in foreign and security policies make it all the more difficult to predict at this early stage his approach to foreign relations. Having these uncertainties in mind, however, there are several issues worth examining regarding the possible foreign policy direction of Mr. Ahmadinejad's presidency.

The Maze of Iran's Foreign Policy-Making Structure

Patterns of Iranian foreign policy-making over the last decade are indicative of a consensus-based process that is built into a multi-centered power structure. The political process underlying the decision-making apparatus in foreign policy necessitates that jockeying factions negotiate their positions within accepted frameworks. The consensus-driven process has not changed, though the framework within which the policy is grounded has shifted in a few distinct phases. It is safe to assume that the master frame of critical co-existence with the international community has not changed; as it is the context for foreign policy deliberations within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This political context underlies a very complex foreign policy machinery that observers of

Iran tend to underestimate. Iran, like every other state in the world, suffers extensively from the phenomenon of bureaucratic politics. Over a dozen formal bureaucracies and a plethora of informal institutions are involved in a competitive process to influence the direction of foreign and security policy. Therefore, it is highly inaccurate to think that this largely sophisticated apparatus could be changed or completely subdued by a shift at the apex of the executive branch. Many of these bureaucracies have internalized threat perceptions of their own, perceptions that are hard to change, and all of them fight ferociously to get maximum access to the most critical player, the Supreme Leader to voice specific interests. But it is also a misrepresentation to assume that the consensus-driven and very vast decision-making structure is monolithic and run by a single individual. Furthermore, the fractured nature of the political system has survived, and there is no reason why this trademark of the Islamic Republic of Iran would cease to function during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Is Dramatic Change in Foreign Policy Possible?


Because of the features of the process explained above, it would be very difficult to change the master frame within which the policy is formed. Even the most dynamic and aggressive president would find it hard to revert Iran back to an age of ideology and away from some degree of pragmatism. The foreign policy narrative of Iran seems to indicate that it has passed the anti-status quo days and is in search of accommodation and cohabitation. It would take more than a presidential change to put the evolving process in reverse gear. This of course does not mean that we will not see an intensified turf battle over the direction of foreign policy. The usual pulling and pushing of all complex and faction-ridden foreign policy apparatuses may become more acute, but the institutionalized process and the actors will bear more marks of continuity than change.

President-elect Ahmadinejad has emphasized the importance of Asian and Muslim states in his foreign policy. What that exactly

means one can not be sure. But indications from his remarks and his associates' occasional comments suggest that he intends to focus more on the relations with great powers such as India, China, and Russia that to some extent started during President Khatami's tenure and has already borne some fruits. This may not exactly be a reorientation of Iranian foreign policy direction. Ahmadinejad will likely continue the engagement with Europe but will be more demanding and drive a tougher bargain with Europeans. His seemingly more autarkic economic policy could have some spill-over effects on political relations with Europe; but that may prove to be more transitory and superficial than substantive.

The fate of the nuclear negotiations with the European Union troika (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) will be the first test of the new president's handling of critical foreign policy issues. Ahmadinejad's initial messages have reaffirmed his intentions to continue the negotiating process. Although the negotiations with Europe over the Iranian nuclear program have been set in the wider consensual process of Iran's power structure, the reservations that the new president has regarding the viability of any European offer could change the dynamics of bargaining in favor of a harder line. But it is also plausible to argue that because no Iranian politician (including Ahmadinejad) can give up Iranian fuel-cycle capability, that process is doomed to failure. It seems that Iran under the new president will genuinely try to make this process work and will do everything possible not to be the party responsible for the failure of negotiations with the EU. Given the pressure coming from his constituency, Ahmadinejad would have to pursue a much tougher line. This will make success more difficult to accomplish unless the Europeans offer a concession to accommodate Iranian demands for keeping some form of fuel cycle capability.

The ongoing rapprochement with Persian Gulf states will in all likelihood proceed unaffected. This policy is so firmly established in the Iranian foreign policy agenda that no administrative changes would undermine it in the



absence of unforeseen events. This includes the overall policy vis-à-vis Iraq, which is based on three pillars of the transition to a functioning democracy: Iraq's territorial integrity; cohesion; and stability along the western borders of Iran. This will undoubtedly maximize Iranian influence inside post-Saddam Iraq. Ahmadinejad seems to be less disposed to a radical change of course in Iraq.

Last but not least is the effect of an Ahmadinejad presidency on U.S.-Iran relations. Ahmadinejad has said on several occasions that he sees no need for the improvement of relations between the two adversaries. Even if he wanted to take a softer tone and entertain the possibility of dialogue with the United States, in the face of an elevated rhetorical attack on Iran and White House statements that aimed to delegitimize the electoral process, he would find it almost impossible to undertake any initiatives. The net result is that Ahmadinejad will de-prioritize U.S.-Iran rapprochement and focus on other issues. During the presidential campaign, unlike other candidates who made clear their interests, he often mentioned the issue in a cursory fashion and indicated that Iran can solve its own problems and does not need the United States. He seems to genuinely believe this principle, which appears to be a reflection of his overall worldview.

Potential Changes in Iranian Foreign Policy Management

If the changes in substantive policies will be marginal, what will change during Ahmadinejad's presidency? There are some issues of style and vision that need to be scrutinized. First is the risk-taking propensity that the new president brings to the job. This trait largely derives from his strong self-confidence. His pious and religious upbringing could be a source of this self-confidence. Second is the perceived mandate of the conservatives as a result of the landslide victory in the election has reinforced the sense of re-legitimization of the Islamic Republic of Iran, hence injecting fresh energy that will embolden the new foreign and security policy elite. Lastly, the lack of experience in foreign policy areas could simpli-

fy the complex relations with the outside world and deepen the existing misconceptions and miscommunications.

Possible extensive staff change and realignment of the foreign policy-making apparatus is worthy of attention. If Mr. Ahmadinejad fulfills his promises of bringing in new blood to the foreign policy community, the existing arrangements could change in favor of hard-liner institutions. These institutions, the Revolutionary Guard for instance, have the potential of moving beyond their conventional purview in national security to the more routine areas of foreign policy. Although the traditional balance of bureaucratic structures could upset the process, it is conceivable that these outfits may be forced to operate in a more pragmatic fashion. Moreover, the institutionalized structures are much more resilient and would in all likelihood put up some fight in response to extreme departures from established policies. The friction with the technocratic base of foreign policy machinery could in all likelihood create more inefficiency.

Mr. Ahmadinejad's worldview seems to reflect an egalitarian approach to the international system. He does not have a foreign policy but a vision or attitude that heavily depends on national power and self-reliance. As a technocratic member of the second generation of conservatives, Ahmadinejad personifies the link between the revolutionary days of the 1980s and the development imperatives of the 1990s and early twenty first century. His overall postures suggest a more inward-looking approach to both domestic and foreign policy. Will the triple effects of these changes lead to the re-socialization of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy machinery? It would arguably be extremely difficult for Iran to revert back to the age of ideology; but a limited paradigmatic change, especially at the top echelons of the bureaucracy, is probable.

Conclusion

The presidency of Ahmadinejad may produce more change in form and style than substance in Iran's foreign policy direction. But as stu-

dents of international relations are increasingly arguing, the form and style, particularly in a region where language and symbols often trump other considerations, could have significant material and policy consequences. At a time when Iran is transforming from an anti-status quo power to a regional superpower in search of accommodation and recognition, the rise of a fairly unknown politician as the presi-

dent of the Islamic Republic with a populist agenda and less-than-friendly image will certainly be a challenge. However, it is unlikely that he would or could stop the transitional process that Iran is going through. His major initial challenge is incidentally how to handle the digitalized communications networks of image-making and symbolic representation, which have so far given him a very rough start.

Iran's New President and Relations with the U.S.

By Shaul Bakhash, Clarence Robinson Professor of History, George Mason University

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's new president, said little on foreign policy issues—including relations with the U.S.—during the election campaign. He did say that negotiations with Washington do not rank high on his priorities. He charged Iranian diplomats with being 'weak' in negotiations with the EU over Iran's nuclear program. He asserted Iran's resources should be exploited by Iranians rather than foreign firms. But these comments suggest an attitude, a posture, rather than well-thought out policy positions.


The factors contributing to continuity in Iran's foreign policy are numerous and substantial. But the election of Ahmadinejad injects new and possibly unsettling ingredients into the equation.

On the one hand, Iran's foreign policy on major issues—Iran's nuclear program, its support for Hizballah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad on the West Bank, its opposition to Israel, the nurturing of relations with major powers other than America like China, Russia, Japan, India and the EU—is ultimately the prerogative of the Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The government, for example, could not enter into negotiations with the U.S. without the Leader's agreement. On these major issues, including those of interest to the U.S., there is a large degree of consensus among the foreign policy elite and consistency and continuity in the last several years. Iran's negotiating position on its nuclear program is not likely to change because a new president has come to office. Iran's long-

term economic objectives are shaped by the five-year development plan. Insofar as these development programs relate to foreign relations—construction of major infrastructure and industrial projects, foreign trade and investment, oil—Ahmadinejad's freedom to radically change direction is limited.

On the other hand, in foreign policy, style and tone do matter. A foreign policy approach characterized by suspicion of the outside world and indifference to what others think of Iran can undo the patient fence-building with the international community of recent years. Had Rafsanjani been elected president, he would almost certainly have put out feelers to the U.S.; Ahmadinejad will not do so. Although Khamenei certainly endorsed the willingness high-ranking Iranian officials expressed in the last two years to talk to Washington, Khamenei has always been skeptical about the possibility and even the usefulness to Iran of a rapprochement with America. Ahmadinejad's negative attitude to the U.S. could therefore resonate with the Leader.

Voices in the foreign policy establishment arguing for moderation and flexibility in foreign relations would be weakened and hardline voices strengthened if the new president is allowed by the Leader to replace key foreign policy officials with men and women who share his views. Khamenei may choose to accommodate Ahmadinejad on both foreign and domestic issues because the new president has support among the same constituency on



which the Leader relies—the Revolutionary Guards, the *basij* para-military forces, the conservative elements among the clergy and the urban poor.

The first few months of the Ahmadinejad presidency will indicate whether the forces of continuity or of change in foreign policy will prevail.

But Iran-U.S. relations under an Ahmadinejad presidency will not depend on Iran alone. They will also be shaped by Washington. At the moment, the Bush Administration shows no inclination to engage Iran; its policy towards the Islamic Republic has been characterized by hostility and fuzziness. The Administration for a long time took a dismissive attitude towards the EU's negotiations with Tehran over Iran's nuclear program before it finally endorsed these negotiations last year. But even now, American insistence that Iran entirely give up its fuel enrichment program remains unrealistic; and with the U.S. still chary of appearing to make 'concessions' to Iran, any package the EU offers to Iran is bound to fail without full American participation.

A proposed agreement for the supply of

Iranian natural gas to India via a pipeline crossing Pakistan would greatly cement relations and ease tensions between India and Pakistan. Yet the Bush Administration has pressured both India and Pakistan to abandon the deal. Washington's refusal to acknowledge that Iran has legitimate interests in Iraq and its repeated allegations of Iranian 'meddling' in that country are but further examples of a Bush Administration policy that can hardly be regarded as friendly in Tehran. Vice-President Cheney's remark that Israel may attack Iran's nuclear facilities was presumably the Administration's way of pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions. But such veiled threats, much like the ambiguity the Administration favors in its attitude towards the EU-Iran negotiations, only reinforce doubt in Tehran about the Bush Administration's ultimate intentions and encourage Iran to adopt a posture of ambiguity, say on its nuclear policy, as well.

The danger is that a harder line under a new president in Tehran will reinforce hardline attitudes in Washington. Prospects for an improvement in relations between Iran and the U.S. do not look promising.

The Iranian Street in the Post-Khatami Era

By Karim Sadjadpour, Analyst, International Crisis Group, Tehran, Iran

The surprising victory of conservative Tehran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran's recent presidential elections forces analysts and observers of Iran to go beyond the conventional wisdom that Iran's youthful population is composed largely of freedom fighters in search of democracy, social freedoms, and relations with the United States. After all, Mr. Ahmadinejad was the only one of Iran's seven presidential candidates who spoke little (if at all) about democracy, social liberalization, and relations with the United States, focusing instead on populist themes such as economic justice and deliverance. And though no Iranian election can be categorized as free and

open—given the fact that only candidates who are screened by the unelected Islamic Guardian Council are permitted to run—there is no denying that Ahmadinejad's message resonated among a not insignificant portion of Iranian society whose economic lot has ceased to improve, despite the country's soaring oil wealth.

Nonetheless, having received less than 20% of votes cast in the first round, Ahmadinejad's mandate should at the same time not be exaggerated; he is still by and large an unknown quantity in Iran, showing up on the national political radar only in the last two years. What's more, among those familiar with

Ahmadinejad's background and politics, he is a polarizing figure, generally invoking admiration among the lower income classes for his empathy and simple lifestyle and concern among the middle and upper classes for his right-wing political and social leanings. As such, the new president will inherit a divided society when he takes office on August 3. Mr. Ahmadinejad's challenge will be to live up the lofty expectations of those who helped get him elected, while at the same time attempting to pacify the millions who believed he was not the right man for the job.

In Search of Economic Dignity

For any visitor to Iran, it is quickly apparent that the primary concern for the vast majority of Iranians is a lack of economic dignity. Despite soaring oil prices and a growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the government has had little success ameliorating its twin Achilles' heels, inflation and unemployment, both of which hover between 15% and 20%. For older generation Iranians, revolutionary promises of economic justice and wealth redistribution have gone largely unmet; per capita income in today's Iran is estimated to be less than half of what it was during the years prior to the 1979 Revolution. The younger generation's economic prospects are even bleaker. The country's demographic bulge—around half of Iranians are under the age of 25—has led to a scenario where, according to the government's own statistics, it can only accommodate around half of the approximately one million people who enter the labor market each year.

This economic alienation proved to be the most salient factor in Ahmadinejad's election. In a country where politicians are often seen as self-serving, he cancelled out the millions other candidates spent on flashy, Western-style ad campaigns by simply having his humble home in a working class area of Tehran broadcast on state television. As one working class Tehran resident told me, "He may not be able to solve all our economic problems, but at least he won't enrich himself in the process of trying." So, in the context of Iran's widespread economic malaise, perhaps it should not have been so

surprising that the candidate who projected a humble, incorruptible image, who talked about subsidies and helping the poor, prevailed over the candidates who were talking about social liberalization, democracy, and human rights. As Tehran University Political Science Professor Nasser Hadian aptly put it, "You can't eat democracy and human rights."

Tehran Is Not A Microcosm

Another reason the election results took analysts and observers by surprise is that Tehran is not a microcosm of Iran. Similar to urbanites around the world, Tehran's population is generally more progressive, more informed, and more politicized than the rest of the country. Rather than rely on official state television as its sole news source, Tehran boasts much higher rates of Internet penetration, satellite television viewership, and newspaper readership. Moreover, political discontent in the capital is exacerbated by exhausting traffic, suffocating air pollution, and high inflation. Anecdotally it is increasingly difficult to find Tehran residents—be it from the north or south end of the city—who have faith left in the country's political leadership. This sense of alienation was apparent in the election, as first-round voter turnout in Tehran was only 33% (as opposed to 62% nationwide).

Outside of Tehran, Iranians are similarly dissatisfied with the status quo, but they are far less politicized. Political discussion is usually centered around the lack of viable employment or the high cost of "meat and onions" rather than a lack of political and social freedoms. This presents a growing dilemma for journalists and analysts covering Iran. On one hand, Tehran is the country's political heart and soul (where the 1979 Revolution took place) and deserves the lion's share of the focus. On the other hand, national elections are increasingly being decided outside of Tehran, given the capital's low voter turnout. While the seeming gulf between north and south Tehran was emphasized during the elections, more difficult to reconcile for Iran watchers is the gulf between Tehran and the rest of the country.



Rise of Ethnic Nationalism?

In addition to Iran's economic and political discontents, one of Ahmadinejad's challenges as president will be to address the increasing signs of alienation among Iran's ethnic and religious minorities. Though the words "Persian" and "Iranian" are often used interchangeably, little over half of the Iranian population is ethnically Persian, the rest consisting of Azeri Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs (the last three of which also have Sunni Muslim populations, in contrast to Iran's Shiite majority). In the first round of the election, the five provinces with the lowest turnouts were either Kurdish or Azeri regions, and in the last few months before the election there have been incidents of rioting among the Arab and Sunni minority communities in the oil-rich Khuzestan Province.

Perhaps the cause for greatest concern at the moment is the Kurdish question. Past conventional wisdom has been that Kurds, who make up around 7% of the Iranian population, are far closer historically, culturally, and linguistically to Persian than they are to Turks or Arabs. Hence Iranian Kurds are far less prone to agitation than Turkish or Iraqi Kurds. While this may be true, a new dynamic in Iraq and a newfound self-confidence among Iraqi Kurds have seemingly amplified the sense of ethnic nationalism among Iranian Kurds. Voter turnout in Kurdistan Province was the lowest in the country, and according to one journalist (who recently visited the region), "They make a concerted effort to speak their own language, fly their own [Kurdistan] flag inside their homes, and watch Kurdish satellite television at home."

During his tenure as president, Mohammed Khatami was generally well-received among the country's ethnic and religious minorities, but in the aftermath of the removal of Saddam Hussein and the rise of Sunni-Shiite difficulties on the regional level, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will surely face steeper challenges. The president-elect's alleged link to the 1989 assassina-

tion of an Iranian Kurdish dissident in Vienna, Austria will make his job doubly difficult.

An Aversion Towards Unrest

The deep-seated desire for economic, political, and social reform among many Iranians is tempered by a strong aversion to unrest, uncertainty, and insecurity by others. Having already experienced one tumultuous revolution (or in the case of Iran's youth, the aftermath of one tumultuous revolution) and a brutal eight-year war with Iraq, Iranians have few concrete ideas as to how reform should take place other than it ought to occur *bedun-e khoodrizi*—"without bloodshed."

The post-war turbulence and insecurity in next-door neighbor Iraq has made Iranians even wearier about the prospects for a quick-fix solution. As opposed to the aftermath of the U.S. removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan, when some Iranians could be heard romanticizing about the prospects of a U.S. intervention in Tehran, today Iranians are not looking to Iraq as a paradigm for change. In the widely echoed words of one middle class, middle-aged Tehran resident, "When we look at what's going on in Iraq, it seems that the real choice is not one between democracy or authoritarianism, but between stability or unrest. People are not happy in Iran, but no one wants unrest."

The task of dealing with Iranians' deep sense of alienation vis-à-vis their government will now be entrusted in the hands of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And despite the new president's vague campaign promises of economic justice and relief, ensconced political barriers to economic reform will likely be insurmountable. Hence, how the new president chooses to act on issues which he has greater potential to affect—political and social freedoms, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities—will take on added importance, yet Mr. Ahmadinejad has given no indication that these issues are priorities for him. While Iranian politics are highly unpredictable (as is evidenced by the election of Ahmadinejad) it can be said with certainty that Mr. Ahmadinejad has his work cut out for him.

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