

Iran's presidential election a harbinger of social and political convulsions

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1 July 2005

Iran's presidential election has exposed a deep-rooted popular antipathy to the country's business, political, and religious elite—an antipathy born of mass unemployment, mounting social inequality, and opposition to the enormous political and social power wielded by the mullahs. The election has also shown that the Iranian ruling class is bitterly divided over economic policy, the country's relations with the US, the division of political power, and its methods of rule.

To the astonishment of the Western press and much of the Iranian establishment, Teheran Mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emerged the winner of the June 24 run-off election to pick Iran's next president.

Ahmadinejad, who prior to his presidential campaign was little known outside Teheran, defeated the heavily favored former president, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, by casting himself as the tribune of the poor and dispossessed and identifying himself with opposition to the US occupation of Iraq and Washington's attempts to bully Iran into abandoning its nuclear program.

Dressed in a drab suit, Ahmadinejad played up his humble origins—he is the son of a blacksmith—and proclaimed himself “a street sweeper and little servant” who would work tirelessly to better the people's lot and end corruption. Repeatedly he promised to “cut off the hands” of the “oil mafia.”

Although Ahmadinejad refrained from spelling out who constitutes this “mafia,” the term was construed, and clearly meant to be construed, as a reference to those who have siphoned off the lion's share of the increased wealth that has accrued to Iran as the result of rising oil prices, i.e., the country's business and political elite.

As proof of his commitment to social justice and readiness to confront Iran's elite, Ahmadinejad pointed to measures he has taken as Teheran's mayor to cushion the impact of mass unemployment and spiraling prices. These included the imposition of a new municipal tax on the rich which has helped finance low-cost housing and improved infrastructure for the slums of south Teheran.

Ahmadinejad's pose as an outsider and friend of the working class and oppressed is demagogic. A former officer of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and instructor in the *basij*, the militia that enforces Iran's extreme Islamacist code of moral conduct, Ahmadinejad is a fervent supporter of the clerical-led bourgeois nationalist regime that consolidated its rule following the revolution that swept away the Shah's bloody US-backed regime through the ruthless suppression of the working class and left.

Ahmadinejad was reputedly chosen for the job of Teheran mayor in 2003 by none other than the country's supreme political leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. His presidential campaign enjoyed the support of much of the clerical establishment, especially the wing that opposes any change to the constitutional order Khamenei's predecessor, the Ayatollah Khomeini, crafted following the 1979 revolution. That system gives the mullahs a privileged role and the major share of political power.

Ahmadinejad reportedly had the backing of the Council of Guardians, or at least of many of its dozen members. The council is charged with

vetting candidates for political office to determine if they are true Muslims. (It denied more than a thousand Iranians the right to stand as candidates in the election.) The Council also has the power to strike down any legislation passed by Iran's parliament that it deems not in conformity with the teachings of Islam.

In keeping with his role as a *basij* instructor, Ahmadinejad has used his powers as Teheran's mayor to curb social and cultural liberties. But during his presidential campaign, he sought to allay fears he would enforce strict observance of the regime's Islamic code of conduct, declaring himself a moderate and insisting that “the country's true problem is employment and housing.”

Rafsanjani and “free market” reforms

In Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad had the perfect foil for a populist campaign that sought to exploit and deflect popular dissatisfaction over growing poverty and social inequality.

Iran's president from 1989 to 1997, Rafsanjani is arguably the country's best known representative of the post-revolution clerical-political establishment. He, like other prominent mullahs, is widely rumored to have amassed a large personal fortune, with interests in companies involved in oil, air travel, automobiles, banking and pistachios.

Much of the country's business elite backed Rafsanjani's bid to recapture the presidency, in the expectation he would continue the “free market” reforms he implemented during his previous eight years in office. These included privatization of many businesses nationalized after the 1979 revolution and significant cuts in government spending.

In particular, business was looking to Rafsanjani to gut labor laws adopted under the impact of the revolution that grant long-term notice of layoffs, significant severance pay and regular wage increases, as well as to reduce subsidies—i.e., increase prices—for gasoline, electricity, water and basic foodstuffs.

A further reason that the more powerful sections of Iran's business elite tended to favor Rafsanjani over Ahmadinejad is that the former has advocated a rapprochement with the US. In the event of such a rapprochement, Iranian capitalists expect to profit from increased US investment and the opening up of US markets. They also calculate that Washington can be an ally in pressing for the privatization of Iranian government- and clergy-controlled companies.

Rafsanjani responded to his defeat by charging that he had been the victim of a well-organized campaign to tar his name and dragoon people, though the mobilization of the *basji*, into voting for his opponent. “All the means of the regime were used in an organized and illegal way to intervene in the election,” he declared.

The former president added that he would not challenge the results because he has no confidence in the Council of Guardians. “I do not intend to file a complaint to jurists who have shown that they cannot or do not want to do anything. This I will leave to God.”

Rafsanjani's comments echo those made after the first round of

balloting by the leading candidate of the “reformers,” the political grouping sponsored by the outgoing president, Mohammad Khatami.

However, neither the defeat of Rafsanjani, who according to the official figures polled 10 million votes as opposed to Ahmadinejad’s 17 million, nor that of the reformers can be explained simply or even principally by the antidemocratic machinations of their opponents in the clerical-political establishment.

Even the Western press conceded that Ahmadinejad tapped into popular anger over unemployment, inflation and the lack of housing and consequently was able to win large votes in south Teheran, other working class centers, and from the rural poor.

As a former president, an ayatollah, a wealthy and well-connected businessman, and a candidate backed by many of Iran’s business houses, Rafsanjani was, it should also be noted, not without powerful means at his disposal.

As for the faction referred to by the media as the “reformers,” they lost their working class and even much, if not most, of their middle class support because of their conduct during the eight years of Khatami’s presidency.

Although they criticize and have occasionally defied the conservative mullahs, the reformers fear any genuine popular struggle far more than the perpetuation of the anti-democratic political order. Thus, they repeatedly compromised with and retreated before the religious hard-liners when the latter jailed oppositionists and shut down liberal newspapers.

That the reformers are themselves part of Iran’s elite is further demonstrated by their socioeconomic policies. “Reform” in this context meant privatization and other pro-market policies, which only served to aggravate the plight of Iran’s working class and peasantry and widen social inequality.

Following the fifth-place finish of Mustafa Moin, the principal reform candidate in the first round of balloting June 17, the reform camp embraced Rafsanjani, whom it hitherto had derided as the quintessential representative of the clerical-political establishment.

Social polarization and political crisis

Rafsanjani and the reformers were spurned by the electorate because they were the most directly associated, in the popular mind, with Iran’s deepening social polarization. While a small elite wallows in luxury—the country’s oil revenues have tripled since 1999—the vast majority confront increasing economic insecurity, near 20 percent inflation and a chronic jobs crisis.

Officially, the unemployment rate is pegged at 16 percent, but many observers say it is closer to 30 or 35 percent. Among those under 25, the jobless rate is placed at 42 percent. Forty percent of the country’s population, according to unofficial estimates, lives below the poverty line.

Ahmadinejad’s rhetoric about reviving the promises of social justice and equality that brought millions into the streets against the Shah in 1978-79 cannot long obscure the fact that he has no program to challenge Iran’s grossly unequal distribution of wealth and income, and that, as the standard-bearer of the Islamicist right, he is the contemporary leader of those forces that were the most ferocious in suppressing all independent working class and socialist organizations in the aftermath of the revolution.

According to an Associated Press report, the president-elect has begun to pepper his speeches with terms like privatization and investment with the aim of winning the confidence of big business.

Ayatollah Khamenei, meanwhile, has urged Rafsanjani to continue to play an active role in the country’s politics. “I sincerely thank all the candidates,” said Khamenei, “especially Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is a resource for the revolution and a prominent figure, and I hope my dear brother would always like to be present in important fields.”

Behind Khamenei’s call lies the fear that the conflicts within the Iran’s

elite could gravely weaken it in the face of mass discontent from below and increased pressure from US imperialism.

But the conflicts in Iran’s ruling elite are deep-rooted and cannot be wished away. Iran desperately needs access to advanced technology. The capitalist powers are determined, however, to wrest major concessions, including tariff reductions and the dismantling of much of its non-private sector (state and clergy-controlled) businesses, in return for technology transfers. Such changes would threaten many Iranian-owned firms and threaten the wealth and political power of the mullahs.

During the quarter century since the revolution, Iran has developed close economic relations with Europe, Japan and Russia. Ahmadinejad, reputedly taking his cue from Khamenei, contends that given these relations and growing ties with China and India, both of which are eager to exploit Iranian oil and natural gas deposits, Iran need not forge closer relations with the US.

Rafsanjani and other important figures within the Iranian elite argue the possibility for an accommodation with the US should at least be explored, given the potential economic benefits and the dangers should Washington persist in its policy of confrontation, replete with threats to promote regime change and launch military action.

Then there are the fissures over the role of the mullahs in the country’s social-political life. Over the past two-and-a-half decades, the mullahs, who traditionally have worked in close concert with the bazaar merchants, have used their political power to greatly increase their wealth, expand their network of educational and social service institutions, and bring under their wing important economic activities, making them both a major economic and political power.

While some, including sections of the clergy, argue for loosening the clerical-political establishment’s rigid control over morality, culture and the diffusion of ideas and information, in the hopes of securing the regime greater popular acceptance, others argue that any significant reform could fan popular expectations and quickly escape its authors’ control, especially as much of the population grates under clerical domination and the socioeconomic inequities that fuelled the revolution are at least as great as they were in 1979.

The presidential election portends great social and political struggles. Not least among the many factors impelling Iran toward a new period of upheaval are the predatory ambitions of Washington and Wall Street. The Bush administration lost no time in denouncing the outcome of Iran’s presidential election. “We have seen nothing,” pronounced State Department spokeswoman Joanne Moore, “that dissuades us from our view that Iran is out of step with the rest of the region and the currents of freedom and liberty that have been so apparent in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon.”

It will not have been lost on Iran’s elite or on ordinary Iranians that two of the three country’s on Moore’s list are currently under US occupation.

A US invasion of Iran would be an even more reckless and globally destabilizing adventure than the conquest of Iraq. Nonetheless, it is an open secret that many in and around the Bush administration welcomed Ahmadinejad’s election, believing it will facilitate their attempts to demonize the regime in Teheran and rally international support for a US campaign to punish Iran for pursuing its nuclear program.

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