



The Iranian Elections from a Distance

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As most analysts have pointed out recently, the most important element which came to the fore during the electoral unrest in Iran, was the divided political and religious landscape within the country. This situation is not new, but finds its roots within the earlier years of the Islamic Republic. It is the evolution of power centralization that made a more authoritarian rule possible, created a determined yet divided opposition, and clipped the wings of clerical involvement. At the same time, not much seems to change for the position of Iran in the Middle East.

Of Revolution and Evolution...

On 12 June 2009, the tenth presidential elections were held in Iran. After the victory of Mr. Mahmud Ahmadinajad was made public, and formally endorsed by Supreme Leader grand ayatollah 'Ali Khamana'i, protest rose. The reformist opposition, who gathered behind Mir Hussein Musavi, accused Mr. Ahmadinajad of large scale manipulation of the elections, and claimed victory. These protests grew into the most serious riots in the existence of the young Islamic Republic, with people asking for new elections and, later on, demanding greater personal freedom. After some weeks of trying to calm down the protests and urging for national unity, the regime organized a mass crack down. On 5 August, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinajad was sworn in for his second term. The ceremony was boycotted by different elements of both the reformist side and the religious establishment. Western countries recognized Mr. Ahmadinajad as the elected president, but refused to send congratulations. While the opposition keeps on calling for protest, fears of government reprisals are rising.

The most important lesson, as many observers have already pointed out, is that the elections have exposed the cracks in the Iranian political landscape. There is indeed a greater fissure between the regime and the opposition, which concerns the very orientation of Iranian society. It would be wrong, however, to see these developments as a completely new reaction against electoral fraud or authoritarianism – let alone as a demand for western-style democracy. The current situation is the immediate result of older political processes in Iran. At different stages in the history of Revolutionary Iran the state power has been transferred to a group which is becoming ever smaller, in an attempt to streamline a post-revolutionary society. This project was to be the immediate cause of the current fissures within the establishment.

The evolution of power centralization already started under grand ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1988, when he introduced the notion of *Vilayat-i Mutlaqa-yi Faqih* ('absolute ruling of the jurist'), the idea that in state affairs the rulings of the Supreme Leader have more importance than the *shari'a*, thus giving the Leader enhanced religious legitimacy when acting. Years before, the imam had already purged the Iranian establishment of radical, less pragmatic elements holding ideas of exporting revolution by force.

The breaking point came with Khomeini's sidelining of grand ayatollah Muntazari, who continued to criticize the violent and repressive politics of the Iranian state, and the Supreme Leader, accusing him of renouncing the ideals of the Revolution. The eventual successor of Khomeini and current Supreme Leader, grand ayatollah Khamana'i, did not enjoy the approval of the entire religious establishment, given the fact that he was only a *hujjat al-islam* at the time of his appointment, becoming an ayatollah overnight. A

couple of months before his death, Khomeini had stipulated that a Supreme Leader did not have to be a senior cleric; the one who best understands the problems of his time was the most fitting choice.

Grand ayatollah Khomeini's measures were largely accepted by the Iranian establishment, given his charismatic personality. Ayatollah Khamana'i however, did not possess such legitimacy within the clergy. Moreover, during the years of his reformist presidency, a secular trend was developing within the middle class youth. As a consequence he sought to bolster the regime by relying on military factions such as the *Pasdaran* and *Basij* and radical ideologists such as the *Haqqaniya* school of ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. A product of these 'neo-conservatives' was Mahmud Ahmadinajad, who surprisingly was elected president in 2005, to the detriment of ayatollah Rafsanjani. Not only was he able to grant the Supreme Leader the support of the security services. He also pursued a policy of centralizing more power in his person, by removing different important conservative actors from their positions, and replacing them with his own loyalists. Thus a profound rift was generated between pro- and anti-Ahmadinajad factions within the conservative ranks itself, forcing the latter into the opposition. This approach seems to be confirmed after the elections. The list of names for Mr. Ahmadinajad's new cabinet, submitted on 20 August 2009, seems to follow the same pattern, placing *Pasdaran* loyalists in strategic places.

The Iranian presidential elections of 2009 can be seen as the most recent pinnacle of an evolution in which the Islamic Republic has gradually transformed into an autocratic entity, with the Supreme Leader as the central figure, and with president Ahmadinajad as a factor in keeping the political opposition at bay and impersonating the new found political power of security services such as the *Basij* and *Pasdaran*. After the elections of June 2009, the regime does not only seem to confirm this trend, but also risks going a step too far in this evolution, isolating itself from a disapproving mass. Question remains, is there a viable alternative?

Opposition and its Limits

Nowadays, the impression exists that the opposition in Iran stands united against a common foe, behind Mr. Musavi. In reality the opposition is too diverse in its political orientations – from the Islamic Left over the Technocratic Right to

displeased conservatives – to be effective. This lack of uniformity and the fact that the opposition speaks mainly for Iran's young middle class, both rule out a durable alternative for the current regime. At the end of July, Mr. Musavi stated that he planned to create a new social movement, with the goal of forcing a different orientation within the political system. The main way of achieving this would be the unison of the different political views within the current opposition. Such a project will not prove to be easy as it remains a blunt fact that trustees of Mr. Ahmadinajad occupy most of the strategic positions.

Apart from some radical elements in the religious establishment, such as circles surrounding ayatollah Muhammad Masbah Yazdi, the religious circles in Qom seem to have given up on the regime, which they see as undermining the theocratic system. But even here the same story goes: there is no serious opposition to be expected, since the Shiite clerics of Iran depend heavily on the financial and material support from the office of the Supreme Leader. This did not stop grand ayatollah Montazari, who was once to be the successor of Khomeini and who is known as a harsh critic of *vilayat-i faqih*, from coming to the fore again to ventilate his frustration with recent developments by means of *fatwas*, and this on several occasions. But even though his personal standing in the Shiite world remains great, his advanced age (87 years) makes an important role for him in the future unlikely. Sayyid Muhammad Khatami and his network, who were already seriously limited in their actions during his last term, seem to play a mostly symbolic role, as figureheads of reform. The call for the formation of a *shura*, a consultative council of clerics with mere advisory function in order to replace the position of Supreme Leader, is also raised again. This stance is an old, traditionalist interpretation of *vilayat-i faqih*, sustained by former critics of the Republic's orientation such as ayatollah Montazari and the *shirazi* clerics. It will certainly have a renewed appeal in the light of current events, due to the mirage of a more secular society which it raises. The question remains whether this will prove a serious alternative: Qom has lost political clout, clerical opinions remain divided on how to interpret the *vilayat-i faqih*, and there is no actual demand for replacing a theocratic government with a secular one – indeed clerics fear its demise.

Ayatollah Rafsanjani currently appears to be playing a dual role as the only opposing religious figure capable of measuring up to grand ayatollah

Khamana'i, based on his revolutionary credentials and close relations to Khomeini. During the entire post-election contestation, he has profiled himself as defender of the Iranian state ideals, by conducting politics in a most balanced manner. On the one hand, he has aligned himself with the opposition, calling the current situation in Iran a major crisis and the violent silencing of protesters as opposite to the ideals of the Islamic Republic. At the other, although implicitly criticizing the Supreme Leader, he avoids a direct collision course, referring to their long friendship. As head of the Council of Experts, Ayatollah Rafsanjani denies undertaking efforts to remove grand ayatollah Khamana'i. The major problem for Rafsanjani remains the aura of corruption connected to his vast wealth, which costed him the election in 2005. Both Mr. Ahmadinajad and the reformists have added to this perception in the past.

Consequences for Iranian Foreign Influence?

Now the discrepancies within the Iranian political and religious establishment show, are there any possible consequences for Iranian foreign policy in the Middle East? Some analysts go as far as saying that the discredit suffered by the Supreme Leader will have a negative effect on some Islamist groups or parties that emulate grand ayatollah Khamana'i as their *marja'* and have extensive ties with his office. It may have a slight influence of course, but it is highly unlikely that we shall see great modifications in the popularity of these groups or in their allegiance to the Islamic Republic.

First of all, as we have stated above, grand ayatollah Khamana'i has never been the most popular *mardja'* in Iran, or Shiism for that part. So, the reasons why Islamist groups such as Hezbollah or the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq maintain ties with the Iranian establishment, are rather inspired by very practical considerations such as financial or material support for their respective national goals. A possible tainted reputation of the Supreme Leader is not enough to damage these relations. Let us not forget that having obvious ties with Iran rather counts as a handicap in Arab countries than it is an asset. Hezbollah for example enjoys great popularity in the streets of (often Sunni) Arab countries 'in spite of' its Iranian patrons, not 'because of'.

Secondly, as a result of this since the 1980s the Islamic Revolution has moved away from the radical foreign policy of exporting her revolution *manu militari*. The country's ambition remains

the expansion of regional influence. Iran therefore prefers political stability in its neighboring countries, and the preferred way to achieve this is national inclusion of its allies and participation in the local political scene. Known examples are Hezbollah, that 'Lebanized' after the Ta'if Agreements, or ISCI, that adapted considerably to the Iraqi political scene after the 2005 elections. These groups or parties seem to have developed a greater autonomy and have fitted themselves into their respective national contexts.

Over the long term, such a situation might pose risks to the Iranian influence in the countries involved, when their allies' existence will depend on the choice between further nationalization and their allegiance to Iran. Also, maintaining these foreign relations will put serious pressure on Iranian economy, forcing these groups to safeguard their own income. For the moment however, it all seems to work out, with Iran having a foot in the region, giving sympathizing parties a maximum of autonomy. ISCI proved this on 12 July by intervening in the Ashraf camp, thus tightening its grip over the Iranian Mujahedin-i Khalq opposition group in Iraq.

Regarding the most important Shiite clerics outside Iran, one can not notice harsh criticism on the developments surrounding the Ahmadinajad re-election. Therefore little effect on their bonds and the bonds of their followers with Iran is to be expected. The most popular *marja' at-taqlid* in the Shiite world today, grand ayatollah 'Ali as-Sistani of Najaf, seems to remain silent on the matter, which entirely fits into the tradition of political reservation. Grand ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadl Allah of Lebanon does not seem to voice his stance regarding the legitimacy of the presidency of Mr. Ahmadinajad, but has high regards for the election process in Iran¹. Shaykh 'Abd al-Amir Qablan, president of the Lebanese Higher Islamic *Shi'a* Council, has openly congratulated president Ahmadinajad.² Important to know is that these clerics are not known as supporters of grand ayatollah Khamana'i and mostly try to profile themselves as distinctly Arab leaders of the *shi'a*, in opposition to Iranian influences.

¹ Grand ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadl Allah while meeting journalists of different Lebanese newspapers: http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/mbayynat/nachatat/mokabala_15072009.htm#4 [Arabic] and http://arabic.bayynat.org.lb/nachatat/mokabala_15072009_1.htm [Arabic].

² 'Qablan Congratulates President Ahmadinejad on Landslide Victory', www.irna.ir, 13 June 2009.

Recommendations

- ◆ Currently, the EU and the United States have a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude towards the Iranian government. Engagement with the regime continues, Iran’s sovereignty is acknowledged, but the violence during the crackdown is cautiously condemned. Arguably, this will prove the most fertile approach, if not the only one possible. The West has little to gain by using bold language or shift to rash punitive measures. In doing so, it would add to the impression, raised by the Iranian government, of being actively involved in the troubles, strengthening the regime’s claims of foreign interference. Thus the regime could win greater support amongst the lower classes of society (at home and abroad) and marginalize political dynamism in Iran.
- ◆ Engagement with Iran is not to be questioned; some observers even see the outstretched hand of president Obama as a factor creating the current political dynamics. In the long run, engagement is the only way for the West of being able to keep different crucial issues on the table and to keep a link with the Iranian people. At the same time, however, the west has to speak out against violent excesses and to watch over its interests in the region, considering further measures if they are seriously threatened.
- ◆ Though Western governments might not like it, it is clear that they will have to deal with the administration of Mr. Ahmadinajad. There is no other option. As the exact nature of the election results remains a point of discussion amongst observers, it seems impossible to know whether Mr. Ahmadinajad has indeed lost the elections. Also, it is highly improbable that Mr. Musavi would have enough leverage in Iran’s fragmented political scene if he were to be president. At the moment, there does not seem to be any form of united opposition, representing the whole of Iranian society, giving a workable and stable alternative for the current regime.
- ◆ The sensitivity and ambiguity of the current situation has to be taken into account. The EU must be extremely cautious and selective in choosing its partners in Iran and the region. Openly supporting politically marginal opposition groups, just because they are ‘opposing the regime’, is a counterproductive form of ‘Cold War logic’, which could damage further possibilities for dialogue and Europe’s diplomatic clout in Iran, even with reformist groups.
- ◆ In the current atmosphere, projections of western ideals would be a great mistake. The EU has to deal with the country within the framework of its own form of government. There is no uniform demand from the Iranian people for a change in the very nature of their state, on the contrary. The current controversy is exactly about clinging on to the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, and the Islamic state in Iran. It is the apparent slide of the country towards an autocratic system that brings people to the streets.
- ◆ As for Iranian foreign policy, in the short term we do not have to expect great differences or shifts in the allegiance of Iran’s sympathizers. Western policy-makers will have to consider the stabilizing role of certain regional players in the Middle East when choosing their partners, rather than marginalizing them on the basis of their relations with Iran. These contacts, however, have to remain under a close watch, and possible excesses of parties involved must be condemned.

Further Reading

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