

IRAN 'S TENTH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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It was evident even in the run-up to the presidential elections of June 12 that Iran was facing a decision about its political orientation. After two former presidents, Mr. Rafsandjani and Mr. Khatami, had tried to open up Iran both politically and economically, Mr. Ahmadinejad went into reverse, uttering polemics against the West and suppressing the freedom of opinion as well as the opposition. The head of the Tehran government was as aggressive about Iran's nuclear programme as he was about the Middle East problem, denying the holocaust as well as Israel's right to exist and supporting Hezbollah and Hamas. The country's economy went into a decline, and instead of advancing, social liberalization suffered a series of setbacks.

Having completed two terms of office, president Khatami could not lawfully stand again in 2005. Originally, the charismatic politician had intended to ask the electorate for another mandate in 2009. In the end, however, he stood down in favour of Mir-Hossein Mousawi who had been prime minister once before, in the eighties. Unlike Mr. Khatami, who was rejected by the conservative camp because of his reform programme, Mr. Mousawi was well liked not only by the left-wing Islamists. With Mr. Mousawi's support, Mr. Khatami tried to bridge the gap between conservatives and reformers. Mr. Mousawi himself benefited from Mr. Khatami's backing, for the latter still had numerous well-wishers among the younger voters, many of whom did not know Mr. Mousawi because he had hardly appeared on the political stage at all after his last term of office.

The twelve-member Guardian Council approved not only Mr. Mousawi's candidacy but also gave the green light to Mehdi Karroubi who, having failed in the contest of 2005, was seen as the genuine reformer among the approved presidential candidates. Having served as secretary of the arbitration council since 1997, the third challenger, Mr. Rezai, is a conservative who has been wanted by the international police for being involved in a bomb attack on a Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires in 1994. Representing the current incumbent's conservative opponents, his chances of winning the elections were regarded as nil from the beginning.

When the campaign began on June 22, all candidates immediately sought to appeal to the young voters. Mr. Ahmadinejad not only enjoyed the advantage of being the current incumbent, he also benefited from the support of the pro-government media and the memory of the numerous visits which he had paid to many of the country's provinces during his first term of office. The campaign was dominated by the confrontation between the incumbent and his challenger, Mr. Mousawi, while Mr. Karroubi and Mr. Rezai were side-

lined. Although Mr. Ahmadinejad enjoyed great approval, not all his adherents agreed with his policies. Surveys showed that many Iranians wanted better relations with the U.S.A. and a more open and democratic society in Iran itself.

Both conservatives and reformers appealed to the population to go to the polls, the former because they wanted to interpret a massive vote in their favour as applying to the system as a whole, the latter because the reform camp might be strengthened by the votes of numerous reform-friendly people who had boycotted previous elections in protest against the country's course.

While Mr. Mousawi and his followers violently criticised the president for allowing the economy to disintegrate, the latter played the part of a modest man called upon to champion the cause of the socially weak, charging his opponents in truly populist style with attempting to enrich themselves personally. Mr. Ahmadinejad also came under fire because of his foreign policy where, so it was said, his nuclear strategy and his denial of the holocaust had isolated Iran internationally. The President responded by saying that he had merely been defending and consolidating the dignity of Iran.

For the first time in the history of the country, television stations aired duels between the candidates, giving Mr. Ahmadinejad a chance to continue his disparaging remarks about the other candidates before a mass audience. Conversely, it was mainly the three challengers who benefited from the attendance of their wives at numerous campaign events because this appealed especially to young female voters. More importantly, the run-up to the polls gave the new media a chance to make their first appearance. Internet and SMS messages reached and mobilised large crowds. Virtual social networks played an eminent role. When these were cut off by authorities faithful to the government, the opposition interpreted this as a strategic manoeuvre to obstruct its campaign. As Mr. Mousawi's camp identified itself by the colour green, the government promptly warned against a 'green movement' that was allegedly preparing a 'coloured revolution'.

On June 12, the day of the election, more than 39 of Iran's 46 million voters finally hurried to the polls. When the ministry of the interior announced later on that the incumbent, Mr. Ahmadinejad, had won an overwhelming victory, this came as a shock not only to the reform movement but also to observers abroad, especially the West. It was officially announced that the incumbent president had won 62.63, Mr. Mousawi 33.75, Mr. Rezai 1.73, and Mr. Karroubi 0.85 percent of the votes cast. While a neck-and-neck race had been expected, nobody had foreseen such a clear lead for Mr. Ahmadinejad which, moreover, might be interpreted as an unambiguous rejection of the reformers' goals by the large majority of the population.

While all opposition candidates maintained that the elections had been rigged and submitted a list of 646 complaints about the putative result to the Guardian Council, Mr. Khamenei, the religious leader, backed up Mr. Ahmadinejad on July 19, saying that the incumbent had been 11 million votes ahead. Moreover, a recount of one tenth of the total vote initiated by the Guardian Council allegedly resulted in yet another increase in the president's share of the vote.

Responding to the attitude of the religious and political leaders, Mr. Mousawi called upon the people to protest, saying with regard to the decision of the Guardian Council that 'from now on, we will have a government whose legitimization is not recognised by the majority of the people.' Similarly renewing his charge of manipulation, Mr. Karroubi said that the election was 'not trustworthy'.

When the government reacted to the complaints about the election by arresting masses of people and banning Mr. Mousawi's and Mr. Karroubi's newspapers, a storm of protest swept especially through Tehran, the capital, but also through other big cities of the country. There were demonstrations as well as strikes, some of which lasted several days; the governments' response was brutality. While Mr. Mousawi and Mr. Karroubi were at the centre of the opposition rallies, virtual networks such as Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter reached out to the masses, spreading messages, clips, and photographs and giving foreign observers and impression of the extent of the protest movement and the brutality of the government's reaction.

The propaganda offensive subsequently launched by the government mainly aimed at dividing the protest movement into a peaceful legal core on the one hand and militant elements on the other. Arrested protesters were charged with being connected to enemies abroad and the People's Mujahedeen. According to the security forces, the student Neda Agha-Soltan was shot dead in order to fan the protest. Numerous local journalists were arrested, and foreign media coverage was severely restricted. Against this background, private mobile-phone reports on YouTube acquired great significance despite the occasionally dubious reliability of their source.

The swift spread of the protest in the face of governmental suppression was mainly due to widespread dissatisfaction with the country's political, economic, and social ailments. To be sure, Mr. Mousawi was also regarded as a man of the system, but the 'green movement' associated with his name was seen by many as a symbol of hope that went far beyond the challenger's actual reform plans.

Reactions abroad were divided. U.N. secretary general Ban Ki-Moon protested against the suppression of the uprising, while Turkey congratulated Mr. Ahmadinejad on his victory. Hesitating initially, Western countries appealed to the government to search for a peaceful solution when the demonstrations in Tehran spread further. President Obama, who had previously suggested that Iranian-American relations should start afresh, held back at first. It was only on June 15 that the White House expressed its concern at the arrests in Iran and mentioned that irregularities might have occurred during the elections.

One reason why the West held back was that no express request for a reaction was received from the protest movement in Iran. Another was its desire not to place any obstacles in the way of the intended cooperation with the leadership in Tehran, particularly with regard to the Iranian nuclear programme. Although London did propose recalling all European ambassadors from Iran, the initiative met with a divided response among the Europeans.

The protest movement has changed Iran's image in the world and effected changes in the country itself. It is said that the Ahmadinejad government has won a battle but not the war. Its legitimacy is now in question, even among Iranian clerics. Thus, Grand Ayatollah Ali Montazeri, who had been bewailing misdirected developments in the Islamic Republic as long as two decades ago, clearly sided with the peaceful protesters and defended them for asserting their legitimate constitutional rights. The impending political struggle between Iran's leading elites and its population will show whether the country is going to progress towards a pluralist system or deteriorate into a military dictatorship.

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