

Iran's New Election and Its Implications to the Regional Security
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Beijing, July 29, 2005

On June 17, 2005, the Iranian voters went to the polls to choose a successor to the outgoing President Mohamed Khatami. Despite the prediction of a low turnout of the voters, since the Guardian Council did not admit the more moderate candidates, it turned out that the election has seen a big turnout and the most tightly contested presidential race since the founding of the Islamic Republic more than a quarter-century ago. Seven candidates were listed as the president aspirants. The first round of election ended up with no candidate winning votes over 50 percent, obliging a next run-off context one week later between the top two winners, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former president of Iran from 1989 to 1997, widely claimed to be a moderate and pragmatic centrist, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, ultra-conservative mayor of Tehran since 2003 and a former special forces officer in the Revolutionary Guards. The run-off election then again produced a big surprise. Ahmadinejad defeated Rafsanjani by a big margin (61.8 percent vs. 35.7 percent), thus becoming the new Iranian president. The turnout of the first round of election was close to 63 percent of Iran's 47 million eligible voters, while the second one was 49 percent.

Ahmadinejad has become a true black horse as few had known his name both at home and abroad before the election campaign as an influential political figure, and most had predicted an assured victory of Rafsanjani, the shrewd, powerful and best known cleric/politician in Iran. Analysts generally cited three major reasons for Ahmadinejad's unexpected landslide victory:

First of all, the vast majority of Iran seems to be fed up with the inefficient leadership and want a political politician who is less part of the present regime and who is able to better lead the nation out of the current difficult situation in a different manner. A son of a blacksmith, Ahmadinejad seems just the person emerging at the right time. His being "nobody" has become his asset rather than a liability. His plain working style and demonstrated willingness to take greater care of the welfare of the poor had won him the title of poor men's friend. His promise of Iran's underclass higher wages, more development funds for rural areas, expanded health insurance and more social benefits for women has gained immense support not only from the poor in the economically depressed sections of the country but among middle-class people as well. "As the people's servant, it is my honor to be a part of this endless ocean and I am also honored that our dearest people have their trust in me," he said after voting. "And I do hope I always remain an ordinary member of the Iranian people." In contrast, despite his

pledge to continue advancing the social freedoms, reforms in economic sector, and relaxation in its relations with the West, the United States in particular, Rafsanjani seems to remain part of the establishment, and represent the status quo in the eyes of the voters. Against this backdrop, it can well be argued, that the Iranian current election is fairly democratic in the sense that it provided an important venue for the vast majority of the people to bring their views to bear.

Secondly, Ahmadinejad was evidently backed up by the powerful conservative force in the country. His background as a special forces officer in the Revolutionary Guards, and a pious disciple of the spiritual leader Khamenei has all suggested that he is the man that the powerful conservative force just needed not only to keep the reformist force out of power, but also to head off the resumption of the presidency by Rafsanjani, a man reportedly not on good terms with Khamenei. The reformists as well as the Western media complained about the many irregularities in the election, pointing to the manipulation by some excessively enthusiastic conservatives at the grass roots to help Ahmadinejad win the votes. These occurrences were highly possible but can evidently hardly be the decisive factor. What is worth notice is that with the coordinated working of the well-organized vigilantes and the clerics in the local areas, the conservative force conveniently controlled up to 10 million votes from the most religious and poor people.

Last but not the least, the Bush administration's policy towards Iran has helped rather than undermined Ahmadinejad's victory. Contrary to the expectations in Washington, its approach towards Iran has contributed in a great deal to the surge of anti-American sentiments, which has in turn fanned up strong nationalism in the country that makes Ahmadinejad's hard-line policy towards Washington more appealing to the average Iranian people. In history, the US-Iranian relations have always been mixed with love and hate. The coup staged by the US to install the Shah in 1950s turned the country a US power base in the Gulf to protect its interests, but also generated deep resentment of the Iranian people against the depressive policy of the shah as well as their repugnance to the US interventionist policy. The overthrowing of the Shah in 1979 turned Iran drastically into the world largest theocracy and the leading center for militant Shiite Islam, and led to the fast deterioration of the bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington. Since then on, confrontation has become the hallmark of this relationship despite some occasional efforts from both sides during the Clinton time in order to reduce the tension. When George W. Bush came to power in 2001, however, criticizing Iran again became part of its efforts for the security rearrangement in the Gulf. Iran is labeled a rogue state, an axis of evil, a regime which supports terrorism and thus must be eliminated even by military means if necessary. Faced with the US mighty military pressure, Iran, whose policy is controlled by the powerful conservative force showed no signs of yield. Instead, Tehran has also been

intensifying its preparations for the possible show-down. To keep developing nuclear weapons apparently is one of its options, which in turn scares Washington. Whether it is legitimate to allow Iran to keep its nuclear program which Tehran claims to be for peaceful purpose has become the focal point of the current contention between the two countries. In addition, Washington has also made efforts to provide support to the reformist force in Iran in the hope of realizing a peaceful revolution in the country based on Western value, democracy and human rights. But ironically, all these efforts seem to work to the opposite effects. The average Iranian people are greatly angered by than appreciative at the US moves. One of the direct consequences is that the rise of Iranian nationalism has become the mainstream and so much so that the pro-Western reformist force becomes increasingly embarrassed and isolated from the Iranian reality.

Now that Ahmadinejad will soon resume the presidency, what remains of the great concern of the world is what policy orientation of Ahmadinejad one may witness in the future. An unmistakable fact is that the conservatives will have a monopoly on power, controlling all of the elected and appointed institutions that govern the country. The prospect has virtually alarmed the reformist force in Iran as well as the Western countries. They fear that Ahmadinejad may well take Iran back to the Islamic Revolution after 1979, imposing greater restriction on the social freedoms. They also fear that the militant policy could also harden Iran's foreign and security policy and even produce a Taliban-like Iran in the end, thus jeopardize greatly the peace and stability of the region. These apprehensions may be overstated. One should be aware that in Iran's dual power structure, clerics led by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have the true power in Iran, while the power of the government led by the president is limited. Thus the victory of Ahmadinejad in the presidential election will not have profound impact on actual policies, since hard-liners have the final say. So, one may well see greater continuity rather than dramatic change of the current Iranian policies implemented by president Khatami, largely approved by the supreme leader Khamenei. But the victory could change the way the government approaches and carries out those policies. Moreover, the future policies of Iran will also depend on the evolution of its outside environment. The US policy, for example, could be an important factor that helps shape its future position towards the West.

Thus, Iran's future relations with the US could well be the central piece of its foreign policy. It can be argued that Tehran has no good reason to seek confrontation with Washington, given the changing security landscape as a result of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, which is viewed increasingly in the US favor. The situation appears very much like that in the Korean Peninsula, where the DPRK feels increasingly insecure and is willing to run a risk pushing the bilateral relationship with the US to the brinkmanship not really to seek a conflict, but a deal with Washington of denuclearization in exchange for the US security

assurance as well as normalization of the relations. The DPRK also insists that the deal must be based on mutual respect and equality. And should Washington continue its hostility, Pyongyang will then not fear to go for confrontation. The same line of tit-for-tat tactics can perhaps also be true of Iran's attitude towards Washington. So, much seems to hinge on the future policy of the Bush administration particularly for the short term. Unfortunately, so far neither side seems to be anxious to soften its position, leaving much uncertainty ahead.

If the US-Iranian relations went further sour, Ahmadinejad's government can be expected to take tougher stance in its foreign and security policy. This may affect Tehran's attitude towards many vital security in the region. It could, for example, use its influence on the Shiite population in Iraq at the expense of the US interests. It could also change its policy towards its neighboring Arab states, which will not only have important implications to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, but also to the peace and stability of the whole Middle East at large. But what may have the most immediate and significant repercussions to the region's security is the nuclear issue that looms so large in the whole region.

With Ahmadinejad coming to power, Iran's position can be expected to be more adamant against giving up its nuclear program allegedly for the peaceful purpose. Whereas the Bush administration insists that any such programs are "unacceptable". The impasse seems firmly locked, stalling also the negotiation with the EU trio. On this point, Iran seems to sit on a higher moral ground as the NPT has given Iran an inherent right of peaceful use of nuclear energy. The US position of denial does not gain much support from the majority of the international community. But on the other hand, it is also legitimate to demand that the Iranian nuclear program will not lead the country to develop nuclear capability for the weapons purpose eventually. That is a huge challenge since there is no technical guarantee that monitoring and verification from outside can help meet that purpose. No solution is in sight so far, but neither is the nuclear crisis doomed to ending up with confrontation. What is needed is good faith for a compromise, diplomatic skills and little more patience from all the parties involved.

But at least for the short term, Ahmadinejad's preoccupation is more with domestic issues. For many Iranians, the biggest issue was an economy that has languished despite Iran's oil and gas riches. Iran's official unemployment rate is 16 percent, but unofficially it is closer to 30 percent. The country has to create 800,000 jobs a year just to stand still. In the fall, another million young people are expected to enter the work force. Indeed, as one voter suggested: "the real nuclear bomb that Iran has is its unemployed young people. If nothing is done to create jobs for our young people, we will have an explosion on the streets." Against the backdrop, it is no exaggeration to say that Ahmadinejad's future will much depend on his ability to deliver on his promise of strengthening the economy

and improving the living standard of the average people. He has planned programs to redistribute the wealth of the country so as to make the poor people the greatest beneficiaries. Given the enormous oil and gas riches, his welfare programs could perhaps yield some positive results in a short term, but will not fundamentally solve the economic problems, which have their root causes in corruption, mismanagement and the rigid inefficient system. Thus to cure the malaise, Ahmadinejad needs to adopt more bold reform measures, which might infringe on the established interests of the rich, including some powerful conservative elements. To that end, he needs a more favorable and stable domestic environment, in which he needs reconciliation and solidarity with his political adversaries during the election, like the reformist force and people like Rafsanjani. In light of this trend, it is highly unlikely that he will become even more rigid to cramp the relaxed social freedoms. Drastic economic reforms will also require a friendlier international environment, which will include normal relations with Iran's neighboring Arab countries as well as with the West, the US in particular. In short, he may also need reforms in his foreign policy aimed at cooperation with members of the international community. All these are uphill jobs which may absorb all his energy and time, and more importantly, generate a lot of uncertainties in the country in the future.

China and Iran have traditionally good relations. Seeing no conflict in their fundamental national interests, the two countries have indeed a good prospect to further develop their bilateral cooperation based on mutual respect and mutual benefit. With Ahmadinejad coming to power, however, China may find both opportunities and challenges in pushing the cooperative relationship further. On the positive side, Tehran may have greater interest in expanding ties with nations which harbor no ill intention towards it. China may be one of them. This could be particularly so if Iran has increasing frictions with the Western countries and badly needs friends to avoid international isolation in the future. On China's part, to enhance cooperation with Iran is certainly in its best interests. Expanded cooperation in the field of energy, for example, could be especially alluring since Beijing is going to have a growing demand for energy overseas. But in the Sino-Iranian bilateral relations, there is always a US factor. Washington has already made it known that its enemy's friend is no less than its own enemy. It is highly predictable; therefore, that the Bush administration will be uneasy about the development of cooperation between Beijing and Tehran, and will even mount great pressure on both the capitals to stop it. Sino-Iranian relations could be one of the nagging topics in the Sino-US relations. Against the backdrop, China may well find a challenge in the future as how to strike a balance in its relations with Iran and the US respectively. Sometimes it could involve a choice between matters of principles and practical interests, between long-term interests and expediency. Besides the American interference, Beijing may not find its position necessarily always identical with Tehran, which could also raise problems in its

relations with Iran. With regard to the nuclear issue, for all the sympathy it has for Iran, and its view that Iran is entitled to develop peaceful nuclear programs, China explicitly opposes any possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear weapon state. Iran must honor its obligations as required in the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state. Whether Tehran under the new president will truly head towards that direction will go a long way towards the development of the Sino-Iranian relations.

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