

# The Bush Administration and Iran's New President

By Arang Keshavarzian | August 10, 2005

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election victory in late June was a surprise for pundits both inside and outside Iran. Not only did the proverbial favorite Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani not win, but the turnout was around 60% in both rounds, so the much-debated election boycott did not reduce participation to historic lows. Ahmadinejad, Tehran's mayor, with the help of the security-military apparatus, mobilized his conservative base in the first round of balloting to force an unprecedented second-round runoff against Hashemi-Rafsanjani. The mayor then reached out to the political independent masses to win over 60% of the vote. The unpredictability and close nature of the result (as well as of Mohammad Khatami's victory in 1997) are especially significant in the Middle East, where elections, when they do occur, are often formalities.<sup>1</sup>

Iran now has a 48-year-old devout president with a doctorate in engineering rather than a seminary education. He has been shaped as much by the Iran-Iraq War and the military establishment as by the 1979 revolution and Khomeini's circle of students. To date, Ahmadinejad has been active only in local affairs (Tehran municipality and Ardebil provincial governments), not in national politics. In his campaign he was able to combine his loyalty to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his staunch social conservatism with a Robin Hood-style populist anti-corruption message and a promise to bring oil revenue to the home of every Iranian. Thus, in a remarkable move Ahmadinejad maintained and mobilized his very close ties with the conservative establishment—such as the office of the supreme leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the volunteer groups of mobilizers (*basij*)—while convincing the “common folk” that he was “one of them.” Unlike traditional conservatives, (principally the merchant class and the clerical hierarchy), Ahmadinejad and Iran's neoconservatives have cobbled together an electoral base comprising the revolutionary military establishment, war veterans, and the economically disenfranchised to trumpet a message that is as threatening to capital interests as it is to supporters of democratization and pluralism.

## Implications for the United States

What does this all mean for Washington's own neo-conservative administration? The night before the first round of elections, George W. Bush described the election as lacking “the basic requirements of democracy” and predicted that “the tide of freedom [that] sweeps this region ... will also come eventually to Iran.” It is correct to criticize Iran's electoral process as less than free and fair since unconstitutional interference during the first-round balloting was particularly troubling. However, Bush's harsh words and threats seem awkward in a region where Washington's closest allies (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, and Jordan) hold utterly meaningless ballots. Moreover, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Occupied Territories, elections have only taken place under highly restricted conditions. Nonetheless, if Bush's “tide of freedom” is to wash away the Islamic Republic anytime soon, it will have to contend with the election of Ahmadinejad and the 17 million Iranians that voted for him in the second round of the election.

Within days of Ahmadinejad's victory, a doomsday scenario was written by the most interventionist elements of the Washington policy circles. They argued



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that the arrival of Ahmadinejad with the support of the military apparatus would result in the radicalization of Iran's domestic and foreign policy and would thus pose an imminent danger to U.S. interests. Patrick Clawson, an Iran expert at the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy, wrote in the *New Republic* that "Iranians elected a proto-fascist as president" who "bears plenty of resemblance to the Taliban's [social conservatism]." <sup>2</sup> Clawson and others feel that Iran's election revealed the essentially totalitarian and anti-American nature of the Islamic Republic, and they argue that—as with the Taliban in Afghanistan and fascist regimes in Germany, Italy, Japan, and Iraq—the United States must support democracy in Iran through the bayonet. "Ahmadinejad has brought the inevitable confrontation between Iran and the U.S. to a head," asserts Jamie Glazov in the online *Front Page Magazine*. <sup>3</sup>

Neoconservatives contend that the Bush administration will have to take a tough stand against a less-cooperative and more-unpredictable Islamic Republic and by leveraging various points of advantage. In response to Ahmadinejad's administration, Washington could pressure European governments to impose stricter ultimatums and monitoring mechanisms on Iran's nuclear program or to cease negotiations altogether. The United States could also take the Iranian nuclear issue to the UN Security Council in order to impose heavy sanctions, a viable prospect under newly appointed UN Ambassador John Bolton. Meanwhile, the Bush administration could more directly support the mélange of monarchists, Islamist Marxists, ethnic separatists, and secular nationalists that make up Iran's opposition abroad. And with U.S. troops ensconced in Iran's immediate neighbors, Washington could leverage its strategic position to nurture armed opposition to the Islamic Republic.

Given the mushrooming of think tanks and forums aimed at studying and fostering democratization in the Middle East and around the world, the supporters of a more-interventionist U.S. policy toward Iran could continue to offer Iranian dissidents and estranged members of the Tehran government a

platform both to mobilize opposition within Iran and to convince greater numbers of Westerners that the Islamic Republic truly is noxious. Clawson, for one, argues for the use of covert operations to induce "crippling accidents at Iranian nuclear facilities that would set back the Iranian program." <sup>4</sup> Of course the specter of a preemptive strike by U.S. or Israeli forces has never been taken off the table, and with an allegedly more-belligerent government in Tehran, this option may gain greater acceptance. If Ahmadinejad's election results in a more-dangerous Iran, Washington will likely use all of these tactics not only to challenge and contain Tehran but to overthrow this founding member of the axis of evil.

### New Currents in Iran's Foreign Policy?

Whether or not military options are logistically feasible or politically prudent in the context of high oil prices, increasing domestic dissatisfaction with the tragic situation in Iraq, and a uniform European reluctance to break off negotiations with Iran, the very premise presented by the supporters of regime change that the 2005 presidential elections have fundamentally altered the Islamic Republic's foreign relations is a faulty one. Iran's new president will not necessarily radicalize Iranian politics, especially the country's foreign policy. In fact, a few days after his victory, Ahmadinejad, probably in response to such fears, stressed that he was in favor of ties with all states as long as they were "fair and progressive relations."

Whatever may be Ahmadinejad's true intentions, a pragmatic foreign policy is the probable outcome. To begin with, the Islamic Republic tends to moderate ideologically driven politicians be they democrats, Islamist radicals, supporters of a centrally planned economy, or privatization fans. As the lead article by Saeed Laylaz in the reformist newspaper *Sharg* explained, the Islamic Republic's system has the tendency of transforming radicals, revolutionaries, and fundamentalist forces into pragmatists and moderates. <sup>5</sup> This is likely to also be the case for the new administration, which, despite its mission to implement sweeping managerial changes, will face a

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bureaucratic machine full of overlapping institutions and competing interests. Any government fueled by oil revenues tends to sideline long-term plans and ideologies in favor of stopgap measures and personal gain. Hence, despite his supporters' aspirations and Washington's fears, Ahmadinejad's Cabinet will face the same institutional dead ends that its more-reformist predecessor faced.

Even if Ahmadinejad and his loyal supporters prove impervious to these structural forces, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei, and there is little opportunity for the new and inexperienced president to act independently. In fact, for much of the last eight years, those who sought to downplay Khatami's political powers and importance—such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the American Enterprise Institute—pointed out that foreign policy in Iran is not implemented, let alone dictated, by the president. The Iranian Constitution places foreign relations exclusively in hands of the supreme leader. Thus, if Iran has taken a generally more pragmatic approach to regional and international affairs since the mid-1990s, we have Khamenei to thank as much as Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami. Considering that Ahmadinejad is so closely allied with Khamenei and supporters of the preeminence of his office, it seems unlikely that the new administration will do much more than tow the official line laid down by the supreme leader, as was Khatami's general pattern. Khamenei, meanwhile, has proven himself adept at balancing his interest in remaining in power with Iranian public opinion, which increasingly calls for better relations with the international community. Iran's generally quietist and unobtrusive stance vis-à-vis the U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq illustrates its unwillingness to play a rogue state role and suffer the economic, if not military, repercussions.

Any claim, however, that Iran under President Ahmadinejad will be no different than under President Khatami or any other president is an exaggeration and ignores the nonideological differences between these administrations. The United States will

face a more-confident Islamic Republic whose political elites have maneuvered through eight years of almost continual conflict and challenges. Ahmadinejad's victory has forged the most homogeneous and uniformly conservative executive branch, legislature, and office of supreme leader in the 27 years of Islamic rule. Tehran has good relations with the new Iraqi government and has maintained negotiations with the European powers while strengthening solid economic and geostrategic ties with China, India, and Russia. The Khatami government's prudent saving of oil revenues over the past few years and prospects for continued high oil prices will allow Tehran to both paper over fundamental economic problems and maintain its investment in technology, both civilian and military. Thus, Ahmadinejad, who lacks Khatami's charm and his ability to quote Western philosophers, will likely project a less-conciliatory foreign policy agenda and more self-confidence. If President Bush continues to categorically chide the Islamic Republic and threaten its sovereignty, then Ahmadinejad, who believes that Iranians under the Islamic Republic have all the freedoms they need, will happily respond by using these external threats to suppress dissent and curtail public participation in the name of national security.

With a seemingly subservient president and potentially fewer domestic critics and rivals in authoritative positions, Khamenei may find greater political opportunity to begin a rapprochement with the United States. Under Khatami, achieving major breakthroughs in U.S.-Iranian relations was a difficult task because the Islamic Republic's ideological and tactical differences came to the surface and fueled contentions by critics of U.S.-Iranian détente that the Islamic Republic would collapse if Khatami had his way. Since Khatami was susceptible to criticism from government conservatives that he was not anti-imperialist enough, making too many foreign concessions was politically risky. However, with a unified conservative Islamic Republic, the prospects for meaningful and serious U.S.-Iranian negotiations may increase. Some argue that peace in Israel and Palestine is more likely when hard-liners, such as Ariel Sharon and Hamas, are part of the bargaining process. Likewise,

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governments driven by neoconservative leaders in Washington and Tehran, rather than administrations headed by the Democratic Party and Iranian reformists who can easily be labeled as soft and accommodationist, may enable credible concessions and discussions to take place. Of course, this would require the Bush administration to sincerely engage in deliberations and to compromise on various issues.

### Détente or Democracy?

From the perspective of democrats in Iran, détente is a frightening scenario and one that has generated considerable debate among politically astute Iranians, the majority of whom do not trust the Bush administration's intentions and good will "in standing with the Iranian people." A neoconservative rapprochement between Iran and the United States would lock out democratically minded political figures from the negotiating table. Issues such as freedom of speech and assembly would be downplayed, and regional strategic concerns—including promises that the United States would neither invade Iran nor establish bases from which to launch attacks against it—would be the dominant points of discussion. If this occurs, "the tide of freedom" could be stymied by the short-term pragmatic interests of both countries' "neoconservative" presidents.

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### END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a background to the elections, see Kaveh Ehsani, "Iran's Presidential Runoff," *Middle East Report Online*, June 24, 2005, at <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero062405.html>> and Arang Keshavarzian and Mohammad Maljoo, "Paradox and Possibility in Iran's Presidential Election," *Middle East Report Online*, June 17, 2005, at <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero061705.html>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Patrick Clawson, "Next Generation," *New Republic Online*, June 30, 2005. Also see Barry Rubin, "Relations with Iran Have Just Heated Up," *Daily Star*, July 5, 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Jamie Glazov, "Symposium: The Showdown," *Front Page Magazine*, July 29, 2005, at <<http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=18946>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Saeed Laylaz, "Enqelab-e modiriyat?" *Sharq*, 22 Tir 1384 [July 12, 2005].

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