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Prospects for reform?: the Iranian elections: assessing the candidates: 'if the majority does not vote, the minority will govern'

Report

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Assessing the Candidates:

'If the majority does not vote, the minority will govern'

On Parkway Square in north Tehran is a large banner sponsored by a political party not supporting Ahmadinejad. It reads, 'If the majority does not vote, the minority will govern.' This sentence is part of the Islamic Republic's campaign to obtain high voter turnout. It also has a subtle meaning aimed at the youth and urban populations which constitute an electoral majority and thus underscores a dynamic of the 2009 presidential elections, considered by many to be the most important election since 1989. A large voter turnout amongst these groups will bring defeat to the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and ensure victory of one of the reformist-leaning candidates, Mehdi Karrubi or Mir Hossein Mussavi.

POLITICAL BACKDROP

In the post-Khomeini era elite infighting became a key characteristic of political life. In the period 1989-1992, the recently elected president, Rafsanjani, joined forces with the right to fatally weaken the political power of the leftists who had dominated the Parliament since the early 1980s. The conservative Guardians Council, with the support of Rafsanjani, used its constitutional power to vet potential candidates for national elections to prevent most leftists from running in the 1992 parliamentary elections. Conservatives thus dominated the Fourth Majles (1992-1996).

This broad rightist-conservative coalition cracked as conservatives opposed Rafsanjani's consolidation of power and economic and social policies. The infighting produced two groups, termed here as the traditional right and the modern right. The modern right and its eventual political party, Servants of Reconstruction, support the economic and industrialisation policies initiated by Rafsanjani and change in the political and social spheres. The traditional right, controlling the major levers of power, succeeded in paralysing the second Rafsanjani administration (1993-1997) and obtained an absolute majority in the Fifth Majles (1996-2000).

The sense that the traditional right was close to obtaining control of all major political institutions reached a peak as the 1997 presidential elections approached. This led to a political alliance between the modern right and those on the left and created momentum for a Khatami presidency. Khatami won two presidential elections with previously unseen majorities. His emphasis on civil society, political reform, and rule of law served to unite the traditional right which felt a threat to its power. At the same time, the Khatami presidency contributed greatly to the momentum behind the emergence of another group, the new right, from which Ahmadinejad comes. On the one hand, this group believes in the achievement of social justice through leftist economic policies. On the other hand, this group does not believe in Khatami's political reformism and calls for a return to Islamic cultural and moral purity as defined by it. The new right and the traditional right formed a broad coalition, called the United Principalist Front, to combat the reformism of Khatami. This group won the 2004 parliamentary elections and ended reformist control of that body.

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2005 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The results of the two rounds of the 2005 presidential elections say much about Ahmadinejad's chances in 2009. In the first round of these elections 58% of the population voted for one of the reformist and/or moderate candidates. Ahmadinejad, whilst coming in second, obtained just 19.5%. In this round, Ahmadinejad's slogans of social justice, sharing of the national oil wealth amongst the lower and lower-middle classes, and war on corruption, proved effective. However, the mistakes of the reformist camp were more important. Unable to co-ordinate strategy, the reformists ended up putting up two rival candidates, Mehdi Karrubi and Mostafa Moin, Khatami's education secretary. Sensing that these two candidates were not electorally viable, the former president, Rafsanjani, decided to run. These three candidates split the majority moderate and reformist vote in the country which gave enough room for Ahmadinejad to come in second. Since no candidate obtained 50% of the vote, the elections went to a second round.

Ahmadinejad's victory in the second round was due to two basic factors. First, Ahmadinejad successfully portrayed himself as a fresh political figure with a folksy touch who understood the economic pain of the lower-middle and lower classes and would fight against corruption. With no seeming link to the economic policies of the previous sixteen years that had created discontent and with populist promises to spread the country's oil wealth he portrayed himself as anti-establishment. Second, his rival in this round, Rafsanjani, symbolised the establishment and corruption for many people. Many who had voted for a reformist candidate in the first round voted for Ahmadinejad in the second or simply did not vote. He obtained 62% of the vote with a low turn-out of 59%.

2009-THE CANDIDATES



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's position in 2009 is significantly different from that of 2005. First, he is now a national political figure with a record on which the electorate can judge him. He is now seen by many as the establishment candidate. Second, his economic, social, and foreign policies have created discontent amongst various social and elite groups. He has failed to implement his populist slogans and has presided over an economic decline that has seen most people's living standards drop as inflation and unemployment have risen. Third, the broad conservative coalition, the United Principalist Front, that supported him in 2005 has fragmented as a result of his economic and foreign policies into pro and anti Ahmadinejad camps. At the same time, the reformist coalition, although fielding two candidates, is more unified and organised than four years ago.

Ahmadinejad does hold several strong cards. First, the government-controlled mass media provides him with plenty of positive coverage whilst giving little air time to the other candidates. Having said that, it is debatable how effective positive mass media coverage can be for Ahmadinejad given the poor economic situation and discontent on street level. Second, his supporters are more likely to come out and vote and be active in the campaign than those of his reformist rivals. Third, government and semi-governmental organisations with a country-wide infrastructure aide in the mobilisation of the vote for Ahmadinejad.

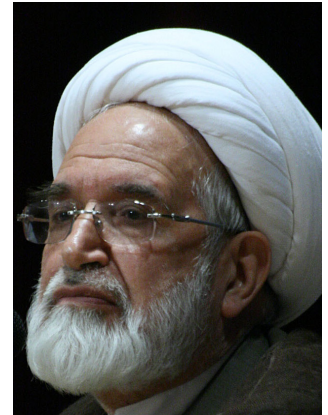


Mohsen Rezaei, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, is running as the alternative conservative candidate. Over the past two years he has become a severe critic of the economic and foreign policies of Ahmadinejad. Announcing his candidacy Rezaei stressed, "If the current approach is continued, we will find ourselves at the edge of a cliff." Whilst he has no real chance of defeating Ahmadinejad, he may take one million or so votes from Ahmadinejad in the first round and thus make a first-round victory for him very difficult. Moreover, Rezaei's hammering away from the right at Ahmadinejad's record weakens the president.

Mehdi Karrubi has served in some political capacity since the founding of the IRI, including two terms as speaker of the parliament. Being the first of the candidates to announce his candidacy, he is backed by a political party, National Confidence, which he founded, a popular newspaper, and a campaign structure in many parts of the country. He is known as a straight-talker who gives sharp and direct answers to attacks on him by Ahmadinejad's supporters. His increasingly combative style with this group and radical rhetoric are gradually improving his electoral chances.

His platform to a significant degree reflects that of Khatami. He has called for economic reform to undo the damage of the last four years, breaking the government monopoly on the mass media, greater freedom of speech and press, creating the conditions for the development of political parties and political reform, the abolition of Ahmadinejad's moral police, and breaking Iran's international isolation. He has attracted to his camp many leading reformists and modern rightists.

Karrubi has two main weaknesses. First, at 72 years old, people see in him a one-term president as they doubt he would be willing or able to run for a second term in four years. Second, he comes across to many as a politician who wants and admires power. In Iranian political culture a candidate with such an image will find obtaining the urban vote rather difficult. He has been working on this image problem with some success, and from the middle of May appeared to be gaining in popularity.



Hossein Mussavi, prime minister until the post was abolished by the 1989 constitutional changes, re-entered political life after twenty years because, as he stresses, "In the past twenty years I have not seen such danger as the one I have seen in the last four years." The announcement of his candidacy created a political sensation and scandal since it led to Khatami's withdrawal from the race. Mussavi is considered the favourite to beat Ahmadinejad in a second round. He has significant support in the establishment, including in the Revolutionary Guards. He does not arouse fears and anxiety amongst the major elite groups and institutions which therefore do not consider a Mussavi presidency a threat. These groups were sensitive about another Khatami presidency. Unlike Karrubi, he will be able to attract the votes of disaffected conservatives and those of moderates and reformists. Organisations such as Servants of Reconstruction (modern right), Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution (leftist group), and the Association of Militant Clergy, a key clerical organisation, have announced their support for him. Unlike Karrubi, he enjoys a positive image amongst those who remember him. He does not come across as someone thirsting for power while instead appearing cultured and hard-working. He calls himself a reformist. Khatami himself has

thrown his support behind him, and many of his campaign posters have a picture of him next to one of Khatami. To gain the youth vote he needs to be seen as the successor of Khatami and his programme. Whilst he has spoken in general terms about the need for freedom of press and the mass media, and political and economic reform, he has yet to produce a manifesto.

Despite his reformist political colouring, Mussavi faces some serious challenges which worry many about his chances of defeating Ahmadinejad. He is rather uncharismatic and is a poor public speaker. Importantly, those under the age of 35, who make up a majority of the population, do not really know him. Both reformist challengers need this group's support to defeat Ahmadinejad. In order to get his message out and introduce himself to the electorate, Mussavi needs mass media, which is in the hands of Ahmadinejad. Moreover, he is still establishing an effective country-wide campaign structure. Only in the week of 18 May did he start publishing a newspaper.



PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

The key to a reformist victory is a large voter turn-out amongst the youth and urban population, including first-time and occasional voters, amongst whom Ahmadinejad enjoys little popularity. The challenge for Karrubi and Moussavi is to convince these groups that Ahmadinejad can be defeated and get them to the ballot box. Both men are tailoring policies to these groups. For example, both have promised to abolish the moral police set up by Ahmadinejad to enforce Islamic dress code on men and women. What probably will be most effective in bringing this vote out is discontent with Ahmadinejad. In the first round of the 2005 elections reformist and moderate candidates captured 70% of the urban and youth vote compared to Ahmadinejad's 21%. Even Ahmadinejad's showing in rural and small urban areas was not very impressive. For example, in large voting districts having a rural population above 40% he received 16% of the vote and in small districts with a rural population above 30% he obtained 24% of the vote.

The Ahmadinejad camp realises its unpopularity amongst these groups and has tailored accordingly its campaign strategy. Ahmadinejad will focus less on populist economic promises, and project himself as the best candidate to defend Iran's nuclear programme and national interests in the face of continued dangerous threats from external enemies whilst portraying his reformist opponents as weak in regard to the West and historically unable to defend the nuclear programme. In addition to this nationalist rhetoric he will portray himself as the true defender of Islamic Iranian culture and morality in the face of western cultural imperialism. At the same time, his camp is trying to prevent the electoral mobilisation of the youth and urban voters. Facebook which had become an instrument for the electoral mobilisation of the youth, has once again been filtered whilst the chiefs of police of several cities have announced that the Karrubi and Mussavi camps do not have the right to put up campaign posters except in limited designated areas. These are signs of worry within the Ahmadinejad camp. Lastly, in order to discourage these two groups from coming out in large numbers on ballot day, especially in the first round, the Ahmadinejad camp is propagating the belief that Ahmadinejad's victory is all but assured. The ultimate goal of the Ahmadinejad camp is to obtain more than 50% of the vote in the first round. If it cannot get that 50% and the election goes to the second round, which seems more than likely, Ahmadinejad's chances of achieving victory greatly decrease. In a second round, not only would the reformist and moderate vote be unified behind

either Karrubi or Mussavi, but also the chances increase that first-time and occasional voters, sensing that Ahmadinejad could lose, will vote. One major worry for the reformist and moderate camps is the possibility of vote-rigging by certain forces. After a period of political wrangling, the Guardians Council has given permission for representatives of all the candidates to supervise voting at all polling stations, but how effective this will be in preventing fraud remains to be seen.

The common logic is that the vote of rural and small urban areas will lead to an Ahmadinejad victory. This interpretation has two major faults. First, these groups do not constitute an electoral majority. If the youth and urban populations achieve a 65% participation rate, they will overcome the electoral influence of the rural and small urban areas. Second, Ahmadinejad's popularity in these areas is exaggerated by his camp. The economic malaise that has hit the country has hurt severely these areas. His populist rhetoric there is not as effective as it was four years ago. Lastly, the support of these areas which he obtained in the second round of the 2005 elections was the result of a context that does not exist today.

Predicting the outcome of presidential elections in post-Khatami Iran is difficult. One reason for this is Khatami's politics which created the conditions for more competitive elections as different elite groups struggle over the future direction of the country and the Islamic Revolution, and of the increasing divide between rural and urban, rich and poor, reformist and traditional. Despite a sluggish start, election fever is beginning to spread and there are signs that the urban and youth vote is mobilising. That which can be said with a degree of confidence is that if the urban and youth populations, including first-time and occasional voters, have a participation vote above 65%, Ahmadinejad will lose his bid to be re-elected. In other words, if the majority votes, the minority will not be able to govern.