

THE IRANIAN ELECTIONS AND THE AFTERMATH

The impact of events of the last two weeks, following the disputed presidential election of 12 June, will be felt in Iran for years come, whatever the short-term outcome. While the future remains unclear, understanding that a fundamental shift has taken place at the heart of the Iranian political system is vital for the EU and other international actors in shaping their future policy towards Iran.

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Hundreds of thousands of Iranian supporters of defeated reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi demonstrate in Tehran, 15 June 2009.

The elections

The election presented an opportunity for the reformists to make a comeback and for the 'principalists' of the conservative camp in Iranian politics (their own description as adherents of the basic principles of the revolution) to consolidate their power by gaining popular legitimacy. What the election campaign showed was that the disappointment of the reform-inclined voters that so weakened them in the 2005 presidential elections (boycott and voter apathy) could be remedied, partly through vigorous campaigning by Mousavi and partly as a reaction against President Ahmadinejad's policies.

Iran had never before had presidential candidates debate live on TV. It allowed for the candidates to battle it out and thus also reveal the huge differences in style and political ambition that exist between them. That the gloves were off became apparent as the incumbent attacked several high-ranking members of the regime as corrupt and his challengers, in turn, severely criticised his foreign policy and handling of the ailing economy.

Combined with the vigorous campaigning in the last couple of weeks the temperature of the election campaign rose dramatically. The energised elector-

ate came out in record numbers (reportedly 84% or 39 million votes) indicating the level of hope and the stakes considered to be involved by all parties.

Who are the players?

The incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is associated with the hardliners within the panoply of conservative factions. He is controversial both internationally and domestically. While his Holocaust comments are seen as hurtful for Iran by the other candidates, he has successfully made the nuclear issue a matter of national pride and security.

He is a consummate populist who has tried to deliver on his promise of spreading the oil wealth among the general population by distributing cash and other short-term solutions.

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The main rival for the presidency is Mir Hossein Musavi, prime minister from 1980-88. He campaigned on a platform of reform as a bona fide revolutionary – he was prime minister in the 1980s when the present Leader Ali Khamenei was president. In his bid for the presidency Mousavi had the support both of former president Khatami and large parts of the reformist camp but also the consummate insider and chairman of the Assembly of Experts and Expediency Discernment Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The two other contenders were the conservative Mohsen Rezaï, a former Revolutionary Guards commander, who has now withdrawn his complaint of election fraud (probably after very heavy pressure from the principalists), and the reformist cleric Hojat-ol Islam Mehdi Karroubi.

The outcome

The Leader quickly endorsed the results as fair and accurate thus contradicting the carefully nurtured image of him as an honest broker of sorts and his office as above the political fray and thus beyond reproach. The quick endorsement was a miscalculation in public relations terms. The people did not end their protests and the reformist leaders did not defer humbly to his authority. By upping the ante and demanding submission, the demonstrators' calls for a new election has partly come to expand into a general show of mistrust against the appointed instances of officialdom in the Islamic Republic.

Thus the legitimacy of the office of the *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the jurists), which uneasily rests on both theological (sharia-based legitimacy) as well as

republican (popular sovereignty) pillars, has diminished while its authority is upheld on the streets with violence.

By deferring complaints of fraud to the Guardian Council, the Leader ostensibly tried to show the protestors that there are institutional channels for redress. More importantly, however, the suggestion was aimed at allowing for things to calm down on the streets and giving the leadership time to analyse the situation, before subsequently allowing for harsher measures by depicting those refusing to let go of the street as troublemakers.

The streets have calmed down, but primarily because of repression rather than diminishing anger and interest on the part of the demonstrators. Severe pressure has also been applied to the reformist camp leadership, circumscribing their communications as well as imprisoning them and people vaguely associated with their organisations or the general notion of reformism itself.

The elections debacle exacerbated the continuous competition on ideological, policy and personal grounds within the elite to a degree that makes a return to the co-habitation of pre-election Islamic republic doubtful, thus constituting the greatest political shift in the country since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. The circle of people and opinions partaking in the stewardship of the country is narrowing significantly. Simultaneously the rift between a leadership that demands the loyalty of the population while also craving the legitimacy that popular elections can bestow on the one hand and an increasing portion of the population, is widening.

In short another chapter of the Islamic Republic is about to close and a new, very uncertain one, begins.