



The usual surprise?

Iran's presidential elections

by Rouzbeh Parsi

When the 2009 presidential election in Iran went awry, and its aftermath rocked the authority and legitimacy of the system (*nezam*), it seemed that nothing could bring the Islamic Republic back to normalcy. Back then, the next presidential elections looked far away and beyond anyone's ability to imagine. Yet, for all other things that can be said about the Islamic Republic, it has insistently and regularly held its presidential polls, wars and political crises notwithstanding. And now, in 2013, we are yet again trying to grapple with the complicated game of politics in Tehran as the official campaign has started. Doubts exist about how many citizens will actually go to the polls this time (it was a remarkable 80 per cent in 2009), but the fact that - on 14 June - presidential elections are to be held in conjunction with local and city council votes may increase the chances of a decent voter turnout.

The paradox of 'principlism'

Since 2009, the system has had to manage not just the fallout of the elections but also the final disintegration of the narrative of a united 'principlist' camp (the term used by those who identify themselves as conservatives on a variety of issues) in Iranian politics.

The powers that be took a clear and harsh stance against the reformists in the aftermath of the 2009 campaign. On paper, therefore, the 'principlists' had the opportunity to reshape the system and the political landscape of the Islamic Republic in their own image, with a conservative president and parliamentary majority, a cowed, loyal opposition, and the military and intelligence-related institutions firmly behind the 'corrective' measures. Yet this unique configuration did not produce a clear set of policies. Nor was any serious attempt made to heal the wounds and rifts that the 2009 elections had engendered. In addition, Tehran's relations with the West deteriorated further and the impact of new sanctions on an already mismanaged economy made itself felt. In other words, despite holding all the levers of power, the 'principlist' camp has not governed the country any better nor strengthened its standing in the world. Why so?

First, 'principlism' is primarily defined by its negation of reformism. Hence, without a viable reformist foil, the disparate and motley nature of the 'principlists' becomes painfully apparent. Second, the revolutionary ideology - understood and championed by the 'prin-

ciplists' as the singular focus and purpose of the Islamic Republic - is not dominant in the country. In fact, the outgoing president himself, with all his Islamist and revolutionary credentials, cannot be trusted to toe the party line. His brand of conservatism does not seem to include sufficient deference to the way the networks comprising the *nezam* operate and, especially, to its core element - the office and the person of the supreme leader.

Third, Iran is neither as frail nor as isolated as its Western foes would like to claim and think, despite all the difficulties and provocations of President Ahmadinejad on the international stage. Tehran's margin of profit, as it were, has shrunk, but it still exists, both economically and politically. And for some within the religious-political elite in Tehran, the enmity of (and to) the West fits their worldview and suits their political narrative perfectly.

Having said that, there is also a groundswell - domestically - for mending fences with the West (without necessarily succumbing to it). Both public opinion and the political discourse have matured and no longer entertain the revolutionary notions of re-making the world and opposing the world powers. Much of the hardline rhetoric in Tehran has indeed a feel of rear guard action, as if negating and staving off the post-revolutionary reality of 21st century Iran; and foreign players reacting to this rhetoric, paradoxically, help keep up the illusion that Iran is a revolutionary country willing to sacrifice it all for those ideals. Reality, however, is much more mundane: Tehran is a status quo actor, not unlikely to prefer negotiations and half-measures that leave all parties sufficiently satisfied over confrontations that may or may not lead to all out victory.

The prelude

The peculiarities of Iran's presidential election process indicate the split attitude of the *nezam* towards its own commitment to the notion of popular sovereignty. On the one hand, the system needs to display its inclusive character in order to buttress its legitimacy. On the other, it is also compelled to

control the process and ensure that the actual contenders come from within the circle of those loyal to the system.

As a result, there is huge discrepancy between the number and range of persons registering in order to run in the elections and the small group of actual candidates eventually allowed to do so. The vetting is done by the conservative-leaning Guardian Council, which is under no obligation to justify its decisions in approving and rejecting candidates. For this presidential campaign, 686 hopefuls had registered; the Guardian Council chose eight. The chosen ones indicate the degree of variation that the system (or rather those wielding its levers at the moment) is willing to tolerate.

The two hopefuls that garnered most attention registered in the last half hour before the deadline. Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, former vice president to Ahmadinejad and his closest confidante and ally, has been the lightning rod

of those conservatives who have become increasingly disillusioned with the president and think his policies as not only reckless but, more importantly, insufficiently loyal to the supreme leader. The mix

of economic populism and appeal to Iranian nationalism that the Ahmadinejad-Mashaei duo has crafted can be seen as a particularly dangerous form of implicit acknowledgement of just how post-revolutionary Iranian society has become. That Mashaei would make it through the vetting process appeared unlikely from the outset - especially in light of the past two years - though not totally impossible.

The other main 'non-candidate' is two-time president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. A centrist at heart, he has connections to reformists and conservatives alike, and a pedigree second to none (speaker of parliament, confidante of Ayatollah Khomeini, and engineer of the reconstruction of the country in the 1990s after the war with Iraq). He represents the hope of re-adjusting the course to lower key policy in both the domestic and foreign arenas. With him back in charge, reformists and others were hoping for a more professional and steady hand at the helm of the state, a manager rather than a rabble rouser or ideologue. Consider-



ing his pedigree, his candidacy should have been stopped before he actually became a potential candidate: discouraging him from signing up would have saved everybody face. Apparently, however, Rafsanjani felt that he had enough backing or not enough opposition, and thus he applied. At that point the political price for stopping him rose tremendously. And yet, for some of the more arch-conservative elements of the ruling elite, this was clearly a price worth paying to stave off a course correction to the centre. Rafsanjani, the head of the Expediency Council (which mediates disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council) was thus disqualified.

A widely disseminated version of what happened behind the scenes was published by *Jaras*, a website affiliated with the reformist camp. What is interesting is not its veracity, or the details, but rather what it tells us about the deep rifts within the circles of power, and the cost everyone understands rejecting Rafsanjani entails. According to *Jaras*, the original vote in the Guardian Council was in Rafsanjani's favour; as this became clear, the Minister of Intelligence and the Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) requested to meet the Council members and showed them opinion polls that indicated that Rafsanjani would win. In a subsequent extraordinary voting session, his candidacy was rejected.

In order to avoid a show down and save everybody embarrassment, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani implored the supreme leader to overturn the Council's decision. The response was that Ayatollah Khamenei did not want to interfere with the process. Both Larijani and the secretary of the council, Abbasali Kadkhodaei, subsequently turned to Rafsanjani in the hope of persuading him to withdraw before the rejection became official - to no avail. Once the news came out, a number of prominent figures expressed consternation: Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter Zahra wrote an open letter to the supreme leader asking him to overturn the decision and 'prevent dictatorship', while his grandson Hassan wrote to Rafsanjani expressing

his dismay and shock at the Guardian Council's decision. The very independent-minded conservative MP Ali Motahhari (son of the late Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, one of the founders of the Islamic Republic) wrote to the supreme leader as well, stating that if Ayatollah Khomeini himself had tried to become a candidate today under a pseudonym, he would have been disqualified. For his part, Rafsanjani let it be known that he would not appeal the rejection.

The chosen ones

The eight candidates that were allowed to run represent the ideal set up for the 'principlist' hardliners. There is one reformist, Mohammad Reza Aref, and one centrist, Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani is an ally of Rafsanjani and is already in effect channeling the hope some voter groups attached to Rafsanjani as presidential contender. Rouhani's criticism of the approach to nuclear negotiations - and Ahmadinejad's policies more generally - has been quite sharp, and has not stopped.

Another candidate with a history related to Rafsanjani is Mohammad Gharazi. His support base is somewhat unclear and, so far, his campaign has focused - perhaps too technically - on the perpetual inflation the Iranian economy and its citizens suffer from. Also close to the centre - but from the other side - stands Mohsen Rezaee, a former IRGC commander who has evolved into one of the many independent conservatives critical of Ahmadinejad.

But it is within the 'principlist' block that the real contenders of the elections lie. Iran's former foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, was supposed to form an electoral alliance with two other presidential hopefuls, Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel and Muhammad Bagher Qalibaf. The purpose of this so-called '2+1 coalition' was to regroup, align and unite the 'principlists', yet at no point in time was it clear who was supposed to be *the* candidate and who the 'wing men'. Consequently, all three stood and all three ended up being approved by the Guardian Council.

Both Velayati and Haddad-Adel have the trust of the supreme leader and can therefore be considered to be safe choices. Their weakness lies in their lack of managerial experience and tested ability to effect actual policy. In this respect, Qalibaf is their opposite, a 'doer' by nature with a proven track record, good reputation and recognition. Yet this also means that he is viewed as someone prone to making decisions on his own, with his own opinions and ambitions. These characteristics, especially after the Ahmadinejad experience, do not endear him to the supreme leader. Ayatollah Khamenei is thus faced with a kind of dilemma between executive skills and political loyalty.

The final candidate, whose name has been touted off and on over the past year, is Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili. A *bona fide* conservative in the mould of the supreme leader himself, he is considered to be particularly well placed to receive support by many in the 'principlist' camp as a younger and more reliable version of Velayati and Ahmadinejad. Yet he lacks executive experience and is not a household name, as most of his activity has been in the foreign policy arena - where he seems to be determined to follow the tough line laid down by the supreme leader.

The bottom line(s)

The two paramount issues in this election are the economy and the need to improve the political environment. The economy is the central issue *par excellence*. Its deterioration is increasingly being felt by a cross section of society. There is a palpable lack of trust in the government's management of the economic situation, with galloping inflation, highly unstable currency and unemployment rates that leave little hope for each generation of new college and university graduates. More than any other issue, this is what the candidates need to (and will) address.

The issue of the political environment may be perceived as more technocratic and endemic to the Islamic Republic's fabric and style of politics; yet it is crucial both for how domestic reforms can be implemented and Iran's foreign policy developed. Several candidates have criticised President Ahmadinejad for his confrontational style in foreign policy. In strategic terms, however, most goals are set and ambitions framed elsewhere (e.g. in Supreme National Security Council), but the president

can influence the political atmosphere as well as policy implementation - by facilitating or obstructing, for instance, progress in the nuclear negotiations.

All this said, it is important to remember what constitutes the centre of gravity in Iranian politics in the long run. Revolutions seldom solve the societal tensions that engender them in the first place. In fact, to a certain extent, they can make things worse - and can rarely escape the socioeconomic fissures they have failed to heal. Thus, the fundamental structural problems of the Islamic Republic - the perpetually unanswered questions of social justice, economic development and political participation - compel each group and segment of the political elite to come up with some kind of response, temporary as well as long term. This remains a constant as the system goes through its cycles of contraction and expansion in allowing differing political perspectives and solutions to these problems. It does not matter how wide or narrow the political discourse is: even within the narrowest of political spectrums, a certain variation of answers will arise in response to the same recurrent questions. Therefore, even if left only with the Jalilis and Qalibafs of this world - both from the conservative political family - contenders will end up adopting different stances and devising different answers to the most compelling issues. Some functional equivalent of the left vs. right, reformists vs. 'principlists' divide will thus develop and assert itself all over again.

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