

Report

The Iranian Presidential Elections: Internal Challenges, Critical Issues

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Introduction

The upcoming Iranian presidential elections will be a referendum confirming the legitimacy of the Iranian regime and provide an opportunity for the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, to put President Ahmadinejad's term in the past. It was a presidential term in which Khamenei was directly forced to intervene and curb Ahmadinejad's defiance, and create new guidelines for presidential candidates.

Despite the heavy task that comes with any elections in Iran, the regime sees the referendum as a chance to confirm its legitimacy and that of the institution of *velayat-e-faqih* (or "rule of the jurist") with regards to matters of governance. But thirty years of history confirm that elections in the Islamic republic do not fundamentally change the system or result in substantial amendments to the regime's policies, especially foreign policy. Hence, it is unlikely that the elections scheduled for June will be an exception to this rule. They will, however, definitely be significantly different from preceding elections because of the 2009 events that plunged the country into an internal crisis whose repercussions continue to reverberate, including the following:

1. The collapse of conventional walls, represented by the previous limitation of competition between conservatives and reformists. This was amplified after Ahmadinejad's apparent transformation, the outlines he drew of a new political wave known as *al-Nejadiya*, and his simultaneous refusal to be categorised as conservative while also considering himself a fierce opponent of the reformist current.
2. The current belief in Iran that the elections should change the negative behaviour that has dominated relations between those in power for eight years (i.e. during Ahmadinejad's presidency), causing many difficulties for the regime.
3. The emergence of strident internal and public differences which most political leaders, both reformist and conservative, agree is due to the poor management of Ahmadinejad's government and the recent accusations of some government officials in effort to undermine Ahmadinejad's rule.
4. The growth of popular resentment due to the difficult economic conditions in wake of regional tension caused by the Arab revolutions and Tehran's apprehension that this revolutionary sentiment will spread among popular movements in Iran.

Iran's current context makes the presidential election a pivotal event that necessitates that everyone approaches the issue with sensitivity and awareness of the boundaries between permissible and prohibited behaviour.

The Supreme Leader and Electoral Entitlement

Under the current conditions, the awaited presidential elections are very important to Khamenei as head of the regime. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the Supreme Leader's intervention was needed more than once to curb the president's wilfulness and remind him that there were red lines that should not be transgressed. In this regard, the Supreme Leader has his own plan, and it is possible to explore the electoral outcome he seeks based on the following considerations:

1. To subject the entire electoral process to one logic, the interests of the regime (which primarily needs to restore the people's confidence in the existing government), Ahmadinejad's eight year rule is described internally as the weakest in the history of Iranian governments, especially economically, proving to be a blow to the regime's prestige.
2. The Supreme Leader is particularly anxious that the presidential elections be an opportunity to dispense with the negative sentiment that emerged in the political arena after the 2009 elections, in turn producing a political trend that demands a reduction of his powers. The trend had two essential requirements regarding the Supreme Leader:
 - a. A reformulation of the relationship between the Supreme Leader and the presidency. Ahmadinejad's presidency exposed many problematic issues, especially the poor coordination between the president and the office of the Supreme Leader to an extent that the country had never seen before, even when reformists were in power. This proved to the Supreme Leader that those who raised his flag and chanted slogans in support of *velayat-e-faqih* rebelled against him most when he and his advisers declared their refusal to recommend any candidates so as to prevent a repeat of the 2009 experience. At the time, the Supreme Leader had supported Ahmadinejad, stating that Ahmadinejad's ideas were closer to his than those of other candidates. Today, that position is considered the exception that proved the initial rule.
 - b. A reformulation of the domestic political balance by opening up to all trends and parties after eight years in which the country saw the marginalisation of important currents such as the reformists, and fierce attacks on some key regime figures such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. This led to fragmentation among the conservatives and losses for both them and the government. The Supreme Leader now wants to create healthy conditions for the return of all interest groups – the reformists, the conservatives and everyone in between – to the core of the regime for competition under the supervision and guidance of the Supreme Leader and *velayat-e-faqih*. Besides falling within the strategy to increase popular

participation, which is required from the Supreme Leader, this initiative will also eliminate any excuse to boycott the elections, as was the case in 2009 with Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, thus posing a serious threat to the regime. An open and popular electoral process will also undermine any plans of opposition figures to mobilise and attack the legitimacy of the regime and the elections as it would be easy for the government to accuse any form of rebellion of being a conspiracy to destabilise the country.

3. As a prelude to achieving this goal, the Supreme Leader gave the judiciary the green light to open the files of all those accused of human rights violations against demonstrators in 2009, most of whom are closely linked to Ahmadinejad. Such a move will absolve some of the regime's central institutions.
4. Even before the disclosure of all the candidates in the elections, the Supreme Leader stated that anyone was capable of becoming president and suppressed the sensitive issue of national security so that it would not become part of the campaigns. He explicitly stated that attempts to exploit the issues of direct dialogue with the United States, the Arab revolutions, Syria and the Iranian nuclear issue for electoral gain even by the president would not be tolerated.

Competing Trends

The Reform Movement

The reform movement is convinced that the next presidential elections will be the opportunity for their return to the domestic political arena. There is no doubt that the return of reformists has become an urgent demand for the government, especially since the conservatives paid the heavy price of internal fragmentation over the past few years due to the absence of reformists from official politics. The reformists' awareness of this reality does not entail that they believe that the institutions of the state, and specifically the Guardian Council of the Constitution, will welcome them with open arms. The council is a twelve-member body consisting of six clerics (selected by the Supreme Leader) and six lawyers (suggested by the head of Iran's judiciary and voted in by parliament). Therefore, the reformists are taking small steps in to prepare a realistic ground for their return and protect their interests. These small steps include:

1. Seeking the Supreme Leader's blessing for their return. Reformist leaders have already requested a private meeting with the Supreme Leader to hear his views on the elections and receive his guidance. Similarly, former interior minister Mousavi Lari visited the Supreme Leader and then told the media that the reformists were working to enter the electoral process.

2. Unofficially nominating several people to gauge the official response, especially from the Guardian Council of the Constitution whose approval must be obtained by all candidates as well as measure the reactions of other groups and social movements to the idea of a coalition or consensus on a single candidate who might represent the entire reformist trend.
3. Focusing on reformists from the academic institutions specialising in politics and economics as the movement believes that this would allow it to regain the confidence of the nation's grassroots and demonstrate that the reformists have a specialised and professional team that is able to solve the country's problems.
4. To achieve favourable results in the elections, reformists are considering one of the following strategies for the presidential race:
 - a. A strategic consensus on a candidate who is active and politically influential. At this stage, the focus is on former President Mohammad Khatami because many regard him as the only one capable of pulling together various fragments of power and as someone who is able to garner all the grassroots reformist votes as well as some moderate conservative votes.
 - b. In case the movement fails to reach consensus on a single candidate, an alternative strategy would be the formation of a coalition of reformists and other movements, mostly moderate conservatives, who see it as a good idea and an asset to the state and its external image.

To meet the existing challenges, the reformists have set out an onerous programme agenda, which they will try to promote early across three levels:

1. They view the country's central problem as a diplomatic one with weak diplomatic staff that have moved away from the idea of dialogue. The reformists argue that Iran 'is a state on the world map and not a revolution intending to challenge the world.'
2. Focusing on the need to restore respect for freedom of expression, the multiplicity of parties and the sanctity of social freedom, by allowing for the safe return of academic elites to community leadership and thus help guide society in a natural course.
3. On the economic front, the reformists acknowledge that sanctions have put a strain on the society and they insist on diplomacy as a means of resolving political differences with the West and rebuilding confidence between Tehran and the international community to lift sanctions and restructure the country's economy.

The Conservative Movement

Conservatives will have to carefully deliberate before officially announcing their participation in the presidential elections. Any such move will be influenced by the decisions of the reformist movement. Although conservatives hope for the return of the reformist movement to political life, they continue to scrutinise the nature of this return closely. The conservatives' entry into the elections came early on through a strategy called the 'studied strategy of disarrangement' which is based on distributing the movement's strong candidates to various strata in order to achieve the required consensus in the event that the reformists decide to run a single candidate. If the reformists withdraw, the conservatives will be able to provide more than one candidate. According to this strategy, conservative candidates are divided as follows:

1. A triple alliance: This group argues that the Supreme Leader's adviser for international affairs, Ali Velayati; the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, who also represents the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; and the former leader of parliament, Gholam Haddad-Adel, should form an alliance.
2. Those who accept the Imam's approach: This is the second group of conservatives. Their most prominent candidate is former foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, who was dismissed by Ahmadinejad in a manner that infuriated everyone, including Khamenei.
3. The Resistance Front: This group nominated the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards and an economist, Mohsen Rezaee.
4. The Persistence Front: A conservative movement that has policies similar to those of Ahmadinejad, but differs from him in that it denounces the close relations between the president and his former chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, who the conservatives accuse of leading 'the sedition stream.' This front nominated the current secretary of the National Security Council, Saeed Jalili.

This strategy gives a good indication of the conservatives' mentality, and focuses on two points that seem to mirror Khamenei's aspirations:

1. The traditional sector of conservatives wants the presidency and will not easily abandon this goal. In pursuing it, they have adopted candidates who are the antithesis of Ahmadinejad. With the exception of Saeed Jalili, most of them are either from among the president's opponents or critics of his policies. Jalili was part of Ahmadinejad's government but is Khamenei's favourite candidate.
2. It is clear that these nominations are based on an assessment of those who follow the track of the Supreme Leader. They also have much experience in economics, politics and even military and security affairs. This is an indication of the conservatives' devotion to finding a president that will alleviate the

acute internal differences and conflicts and that has had successes during Ahmadinejad's presidency.

Al-Nejadiyah and the Survival Strategy

It is evident that Ahmadinejad will not give up power easily. He is attempting to find a means to remain in the political arena, by leading a movement that recognises his unique characteristics and distinguishes him from other political trends. It is therefore safe to say that there is now a new political-ideological current called '*Al-Nejadiyah*' (after Ahmedinejad) that is preparing to take on the elections on two bases:

1. As an independent political and ideological platform that does not belong to the conservatives and is distant from reformist ideas and political beliefs.
2. From an ideological perspective, the *Nejadi* trend has an operational approach different from the formal approach of the existing political system.

This new movement faces a number of important challenges:

1. Ahmadinejad's persona and behaviour are regarded as confrontational, resulting in the existence of strong opponents within almost all political movements.
2. The movement's strained relationship with old conservative friends – especially those closely linked to the leader – who had supported Ahmadinejad's policies earlier, created a problem for him in the Guardian Council of the Constitution, which has become a bulwark against any *Nejadi* candidate entering the electoral race.
3. The reluctance of Ahmadinejad and those close to him to enter any political coalition, which may be necessary to gain power.
4. Their belief that they have strong popular support among the rural poor. This is largely true, but it has given *Nejadis* a false sense of confidence.

In order to stay in power, the *Nejadi* movement is vacillating between two options that together constitute what *Nejadis* call their survival strategy:

The first option is for the movement to nominate the presidential candidate from within itself and specifically from within Ahmedinejad's small inner circle. Some of the movement's strategists have discovered that Ahmadinejad has a list of preferred candidates.

1. At the top of the list is his former chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, although he would be unlikely to be approved by the Guardian Council of the

Constitution because he has been accused of being a leader of the 'sedition movement' and the Supreme Leader ordered his removal from the post of first vice-president after a statement in which he described Israel and Iran as friends.

2. Gholam-Hossein Elham, a well-known conservative and former spokesperson for the Guardian Council of the Constitution. Although he decided to join and defend Ahmadinejad's government, he may not face difficulty in obtaining the support of the council.
3. The current foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, who may be a surprise Ahmadinejad nomination. He is a prominent academic who neither is close to any movement nor has a clear political orientation. He is able to move between all political trends because he enjoys widespread popularity, especially among academics.

The second option is to nominate an external candidate who enjoys the support of the regime and whose loyalty would therefore be uncontested by other trends. Hashemi Shahroudi has been mentioned. He strengthened relations with Ahmadinejad after leaving his post as head of the judiciary. If Ahmadinejad is able to persuade Shahroudi to accept the nomination and the *Nejadis* nominate him, state institutions and other movements may be put in an uncomfortable situation.

Whatever options Ahmadinejad's movement has, his electoral platform will be different from those of the other parties, all of which will blame Ahmadinejad's government for the poor economic and social conditions of the country.

It is likely that the *Nejadis* will include the following elements into their electoral campaign:

1. Explicit acknowledgement of political and economic failures and deficiencies. The goal of this would be to minimise the impact of their opponents' criticism, which would be directed against the government and its policies.
2. Work to detect some of the hidden, or what the movement calls 'absent facts,' concerning the objection of security and military figures to the execution of the state's agenda, especially its economic agenda, as it does not serve the interests of influential members of parliament, the Expediency Discernment Council and the Guardian Council of the Constitution.
3. Concentration of campaigning efforts on rural and remote villages and targeting the poor, to whom the government was keen to give extra funding during Ahmadinejad's second presidential term.

Popular Demands: The Economy First and Foremost

The economy was never a decisive factor in the selection of the president of Iran.

It is the priorities of the state and the commitment of the candidates to the rules of the regime and the principle of *velayat-e-faqih* that have been more pressing issues. But the issue in the people's minds is different this time. The economic hardships Iranians have faced as a result of international sanctions have strained them and reduced their purchasing power to a bare minimum, especially with the rising prices of even locally produced goods. This has prompted them to place the economy at the top of their priority lists. Officials are evidently worried that popular resentment towards the government might turn into a popular movement that is difficult to control, especially in light of the recent revolutions demanding change and reform in the region. In effort to figure out what the people want from the next president, a website specialising in economic issues conducted an independent questionnaire, and came up with the following results:

1. The halt of economic inflation to facilitate the reduction of unemployment and the creation of jobs
2. The end of the depreciation of the Iranian Rial against the dollar, and the reduction income dependence on oil exports
3. The rehabilitation of banks and financial institutions and the revision of policies relating to the reduction of reconstruction loans and import and export projects
4. The elimination of austerity policies pursued by the current government and granting local investors opportunities
5. Freedom of expression and other social freedoms

Trends within the Electoral Scene

It seems clear that none of the political trends are ready to make concessions at this stage. Although only months before the start of the electoral marathon, several factors could determine the trends and orientations of the electoral scene.

1. There are those who favour the fierce competition between the different political movements that could potentially develop into wars of accusation that cross the red line by challenging the validity of electoral results. It could open the door to accusations of fraud, which the state and the Supreme Leader will try to prevent.
2. The *Nejadi* movement's participation in the elections through a candidate of its own and whose ideas will be a challenge for the institutions responsible for conducting the electoral process, particularly the Guardian Council of the Constitution, and may lead to more fragmentation among conservative currents, and between supporters and opponents.

3. So far, it seems difficult for the reformist movement that has returned from its long slumber to achieve surprising results. This increases the possibility that competition will only be between the conservatives themselves, especially since it is almost impossible to unite all the conservatives with their various orientations on a single candidate.
4. Security concerns and a fear of uprisings may require security presence in most of the junctures of the electoral process so as to prevent a repetition of the 2009 events.

Ultimately, it is certain that any future president, from whichever political stream, will be required to redraw the boundaries of relations with the Supreme Leader, for the interest of what the latter sees as right, especially in foreign policy and sensitive domestic issues.

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