

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Iran's Presidential Election Results: Expert Teleconference

Participant:

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Following the surprise announcement that President Ahmadinejad won outright the first round of Iran's presidential election, Karim Sadjadpour explained the implications for the Obama administration's diplomatic initiative with Iran and the domestic reaction. A transcript of the teleconference follows.

Karim SADJADPOUR:

If there are questions about specific improprieties I'm happy to go into more detail. I'll preface my remarks by saying these election results were highly dubious for multiple reasons. First, the government entity tasked with overseeing these elections is the Ministry of Interior. Well the head of the Ministry of Interior, Sadegh Mahsouli, was directly appointed by President Ahmadinejad. So their objectivity was highly questionable. The government entity responsible for assessing the fairness of the elections is the Guardian Council, whose head, Ayatollah Jannati, publicly endorsed Ahmadinejad. So from the beginning there were warning signs that the way votes were counted was not going to be fair. Now what's interesting is that Mousavi's camp claims they were informed by the Interior Ministry at 11pm on June 12, the night of the election, that the tabulated results showed them to be victorious, but they were asked not to celebrate until Sunday. Shortly thereafter, however, state media announced that Ahmadinejad was the winner. There are other fairly egregious examples of improprieties. For example Mousavi, who is an ethnic Azeri, overwhelmingly lost the Iran province of Azerbaijan to Ahmadinejad. This is somewhat akin to Barack Obama losing the African American vote to John McCain. Another example is that the fact that Mehdi Karroubi got less than 1

percent of the vote, despite winning 17 percent of the vote in 2005. He overwhelmingly lost his home province of Lorestan, which he won last time. Another example is that Ahmadinejad was declared the victor when only 19 percent of the votes had been tabulated. So there are a lot of signs that these elections were fraudulent.

In retrospect, it looks like the entire campaign was a show, in the sense that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei was never going to let Ahmadinejad lose. I think we should be clear now about what type of regime we are dealing with. Just as we talk about Assad's Syria and Mubarak's Egypt, I think we are now dealing with Khamanei's Iran.

With regards to U.S. policy, I fear that Ahmadinejad is an insurmountable obstacle to confidence building with Iran. I think its going to make it incredibly difficult for the Obama administration to acquiesce on Iran's enrichment of uranium when there is a president in Tehran who continues to deny the Holocaust, and continues to be belligerent toward Israel. And I don't see, if indeed these results are allowed to stand, I don't see the probability of Ahmadinejad taking a more moderate or conciliatory approach his second time around. Based on Ahmadinejad's victory speech, it appears he believes he earned political capital, and now he's going to spend it.

A couple last points. I think no matter how painful this election is for the United States, Iran will remain integral to half a dozen issues of critical importance to the United States: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and energy security. So if indeed these results are allowed to stand, I think we have no other choice but to continue to try and open a sustained dialogue with Tehran. Maybe the word we've been using, engagement, doesn't have the right connotations, because engagement somehow implies something conciliatory. I'm not talking a conciliatory dialogue, but a

hardnosed dialogue, similar to the dialogues we had with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. I think it's going to be a very cold dialogue.

Lastly, I would reemphasize that this is the unambiguous reaffirmation of Ayatollah Khamenei as the most powerful individual in Iran. Because of the high profile of the Iranian president, whether it was President Ahmadinejad, President Khatami, or former President Rafsanjani, because of the high profile of the Iranian president, Ayatollah Khamenei has wielded power without accountability. And I think the Obama administration should cut through the ambiguity, and publicly say they are ready to deal with Khamenei directly. I think we should make it clear Khamenei is personally responsible for Iran's economic malaise and political isolation. And if Iran doesn't reciprocate U.S. overtures, I think we should make clear to the world, and to the Iranians, that Khamenei is the impediment. Because again, for too long he's had power without accountability and this election was a very clear indicator of where the power lies in Iran, and I think we should be clear about where power lies in Iran and in a way not be distracted by Ahmadinejad, however distracting he may be. If indeed these results are allowed to stand I think we should go directly to the source of power, directly to Khamenei, and make it clear we are ready to deal with him directly. I'll leave my comments there.

QUESTION: I would like to ask, Karim, you seem to be saying two messages. On the one hand, you said that it was an insurmountable obstacle to U.S. acquiescence on enrichment of uranium, since Ahmadinejad was reelected, but on the other hand you said we have no choice but to open a sustained dialogue with Iran. So, I just want to work out, how you see the dynamic of conversations with Iran going. Since the U.S. had so much scope of compromise, if these elections had gone another way.

SADJADPOUR: Let me be more clear. I said that I fear Ahmadinejad is an insurmountable obstacle to confidence building with Iran, and its going to make it much more difficult for the Obama administration to acquiesce on Iran's enrichment of uranium when you have President in Tehran denying the Holocaust and threatening Israel.

My point with regard to Khamenei, is that he's had a free ride for a long time. He's had power without accountability; he is not held responsible for Iran's tremendous economic and political malaise; the president usually is. I think that we need to go directly to the source of power in Tehran and try to commence hard-nosed negotiations with Khamenei. If they begin to bear fruit, fantastic. If they don't, I think it will be clear to all, both domestically within Iran and to our allies, not only the Europeans, but also the Russians, the Chinese, the Indians—the countries whom we're trying to recruit into a more robust international coalition—that the impediment is Iran, and the impediment within Iran is Ayatollah Khamenei. The impediment to confidence building is no longer the United States. During the Bush administration we the United States often united Iran's disparate political factions against a common threat. I do believe that we're starting to see tremendous fissures in Iran now, not only between the people and the state but also amongst the political elite themselves, unprecedented fissures. I think even if our overtures to Tehran prove not to be reciprocated, we're going to accentuate these internal cleavages, paradoxes, and contradictions within the regime. I want to make it clear, I'm certainly not predicting a revolution; there are no silver bullets or short-term panaceas. Given how integral Iran is to the various issues I mentioned which are of urgent concern to U.S. foreign policy, if these elections results stand, I don't see any other option besides dealing with the Iranian leaders we have, not the Iranian leaders we wish we had.

QUESTION: Two questions. One is, have we heard anything from people like Khatami or Rafsanjani yet about the election, and do you expect to hear from them in the near future? Second question would be, what are your thoughts on what was seen on the street and the size of the demonstrations and what that means exactly for the regime.

SADJADPOUR: Just before I got on the phone I was talking to people in Tehran, and so far there haven't been any statements from Khatami. And no statements from Rafsanjani either. Moussavi was supposed to announce a press conference but apparently it's been delayed. It's unclear whether they are going to call people into the streets. I think what they initially want to do is to meet with the Leader and see if they can get either a recount or have the election cancelled and a new vote take place. With regard to the street demonstrations, I've spoken to people who've attended some of the demonstrations; I've watched some of them on the internet. They're not insignificant in size—several thousands of people—but they're certainly not, at the moment, significant enough to cause any type of existential threat to the regime. One thing we have to be clear about, the regime has a monopoly of coercion. The Basij militia and the Revolutionary Guard are really the only groups in Iran which are both armed and organized. In a way, it's the one thing that this regime does very well. They have repression down to a science. Before the election SMS was the main way that these political camps were communicating with one another and organizing their political rallies, and since then the SMS network is down, people have no means of communicating and coordinating with one another to organize more robust protests. And, another thing the regime does very efficiently is block traffic, so if you're trying to get to a main area of central Tehran like Vanak Square or Valiasr Street, that's the main thoroughfare in Tehran, they block off the different highways so it's impossible for you to get there. So they're very adept when it comes to quashing protests. My sense is that we will continue to see

isolated protests in Tehran, and depending on the response of the Moussavi camp and Khatami and others, we may see these protests begin to grow or to mushroom. But I can tell you, historically, the reformists have always been reluctant to provoke a major tumult. They've always put the survival and the integrity of the Islamic Republic above everything else. So I would be surprised if Moussavi calls people into the streets, or Khatami called people into the streets. If they did however, I think the regime would react by detaining those individuals—Moussavi, Khatami, even Rafsanjani. They're not going to go out and arrest individual protesters, they will just decapitate these movements and take out any type of leadership they might have.

QUESTION: Do you think Khamenei miscalculated, in the sense that, why did he give us a show that captivated the world and sort of gave this impression, and kind of indicated that there was this real push for change and then have to sort of turn around and squash it? I mean, did he think that these opposition guys didn't have that much support so let's just let it play out? Now the cat is kind of out of the bag. And now he's going to have to somehow give in, or it's going to be looked at as a fraudulent system. And like you said, he's going to be held more to account than in the past.

SADJADPOUR: It's a great question. I would rewind a little bit and look at the presidential candidates that the Guardian Council allowed to run. Remember that Khatami was basically told he should not run; there were even implicit threats against his life. And the three candidates that were allowed to run other than Ahmadinejad--one of them was a 72-year old cleric, Mehdi Karroubi, with limited popular support. The other was Mohsen Rezaii, a former Revolutionary Guard commander with virtually no popular support. And the one reformist candidate they allowed was Mir-Hossein Mousavi, 67-years old, uncharismatic, people didn't really know him. As you said, I don't think Khamenei

ever expected that this movement could grow into what it was; that this green tsunami would have developed into what it was. I don't think Khamenei ever anticipated it would grow into what it was. Now, there was a very telling statement about three days before the election, from the head of the Revolutionary Guards' political arm, a guy called Javani. He said that Moussavi supporters were trying to foment a Velvet Revolution, and that the Revolutionary Guards would be on hand to crush it. This proved to be a prescient statement. I suspect that Khamenei and some Revolutionary Guard commanders were very concerned about the prospects of it growing and getting out of hand. And they simply decided to nip it in the bud. Do I think he miscalculated? I do, I don't think he ever anticipated this type of a reaction, but with Khamenei you often wonder how informed he is by his advisers, and how much of the information which is getting to him is filtered and how much is unfiltered. I do think that we may look back on this a couple years from now and say that this was a miscalculation. As we talked about earlier, Khamenei is now so directly associated with Ahmadinejad, he has tied his wagon to that of Ahmadinejad, that I think people are going to start putting his feet to the fire and holding him accountable for some of these things. He's really alienated his contemporaries—people like Rafsanjani, Nateq-Nuri, and Karroubi—who are elders of the Revolution. I don't think in its thirty year history the elites of the Islamic Republic have ever been so divided as they are today.

QUESTION: Do you think there is any chance for compromise? If he was so detached, and some of his advisers were saying, well you may have a real problem here if you don't somehow try to bring Mousavi in, or do something, or do you think they've made they're decision and that's pretty much it and now we're headed for some real rough waters?

SADJADPOUR: These individuals—Ahmadinejad and his team—I've seen no indication over the last four years that they're democrats who are interested in power sharing. They're real monopolists when it comes to power, and so I don't see any type of hope for say a Kenyan-style power sharing agreement. I think what Khamenei is calculating is that, yeah, there will be some outrage, in North Tehran people will start to protest, but we will sustain it, it will happen for a week or so, it will calm down and in a couple months everyone will forget about this. I think that's essentially what their calculations are. I think if you saw Ahmadinejad's victory speech, it wasn't at all conciliatory toward the reformists, it wasn't magnanimous, he wasn't talking about this being a close elections and he looks forward to being the president of all Iranians, it was much more an affirmation of the mandate that people have given him and his talk of starting a new movement and this was again a real mandate for him. So I don't get any indication that this means some type of a power sharing agreement and I don't know how Khamenei walks this back down, I think it's going to be very difficult to walk back on this.

QUESTION: Could you go into more details about what are the options now for the United States. I mean, will they acknowledge that Ahmadinejad is the president and how do they take it from here in terms of engagement? We've already heard some reports, we've already spoken to some senior officials, saying that they look forward to engaging with the Iranian government. So, they don't seem to think, they're trying not to give the impression that this will be a setback for their attempts to engage. But how is it going to work effectively and what about the argument that engaging with Iran when Ahmadinejad is the president and he's on the same page as the Supreme Leaders is easier than engaging with a President Mousavi that is not really speaking for the Supreme Leader.

SADJADPOUR: They're good points. What I would say is first of all, I think it would be premature for the United States to acknowledge Ahmadinejad as the victor in this election. The dust certainly hasn't settled in Tehran, and I think it would really send the wrong message if the U.S. were to come out and affirm Ahmadinejad's victory. So I would simply advise U.S. officials to say that they are going to continue to monitor this election closely, and it may be awhile yet before the dust settles. But if the results stand as they are, I'm not sure if you heard my conversation earlier, but what I said is, however painful Ahmadinejad's renewed mandate may be for the U.S., Iran is going to remain integral to half a dozen issues of critical importance to the U.S.: Afghanistan, Iraq, Arab-Israeli conflict, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and energy security. So I think that, for the U.S., that means we have no other choice but to try to open a sustained dialogue with Tehran. Maybe we should find another word than engagement. I think that engagement somehow implies something conciliatory, as if we want to give them a warm hug. These are going to be very cold talks, but we do have to, given Iran's influence on these areas of urgent concern to us, we have no other choice but to open a sustained dialogue. For too long now, because of the high profile of the Iranian president, whether it was Ahmadinejad or whether it was Khatami, for too long now, Ayatollah Khamenei has held power without accountability. What I think the Obama administration should do, if indeed these results are allowed to stand, is to cut through this dance, to cut through this farce, make it clear to the Iranians that we're ready to deal with Ayatollah Khamenei directly. And I think this is important because we should make Khamenei personally responsible and accountable for Iran's deteriorating economy and political isolation. If Iran doesn't reciprocate any American overtures I think we should make it clear to the Iranian people, to the Iranian political elites, to our allies, and to the Russians, Chinese, and others that Ayatollah Khamenei is the impediment. Because again, I think for too long now, he has behind the scenes with most of the influence but

none of the blame. When I was based in Tehran this was always that case. People would say, “Khatami didn’t do anything to fulfill his promises of political reform.” Or “Ahmadinejad has wrecked the economy.” You rarely hear Khamenei’s name being mentioned. Now, you make a good point, is it easier to deal with Iran now that President Ahmadinejad is working in concert with the Leader? What I always said was that, in order for there to be some sort of diplomatic breakthrough between the U.S. and Iran, a few things have to fall in place. First, you have to have a president in Washington who’s willing to stick their neck out and deal with Iran. We have that in President Obama.

SADJADPOUR: ...We have that in President Obama. Next you have to have a president in Tehran who meets two criteria: a) he’s someone who is trusted by the Leader, and b) he’s someone who the U.S. can work with as well. The problem with Khatami was that he met the second criteria but not the first, meaning the U.S. could work with him but he wasn’t trusted by the Leader. But the problem with Ahmadinejad is exactly the opposite: he’s someone the Leader can work with, and maybe, practically speaking, it could make a dialogue or engagement easier if you have a president like Ahmadinejad who’s working in concert with the Leader, but politically speaking, it’s a huge problem. It’s going to be very difficult to sell this politically—both internally within the U.S. and to countries like Israel—that we’re going to continue this engagement effort indefinitely, while Iran is simply increasing the amount of centrifuges it is spinning and its president is travelling to international forums and continuing to deny the Holocaust and threatening Israel’s existence. I think, politically speaking, it’s going to be infinitely more difficult to really have a sustained engagement approach toward Iran, and I think the Obama administration understands this dilemma very well.

Question: If I could just pick up on that. In the long term—I know it's a slightly theoretical question—but it might make it easier for the U.S., if engagement fails, to get the international community on board to clamp down on Iran?

SADJADPOUR: I'm sorry, can you repeat that?

Question: Sure. In the long term, having Ahmadinejad there and showing the importance, the power that he has, might make it easier over the long term for the United States to get the international community on board if and when engagement fails, because he's a leader nobody likes?

SADJADPOUR: Well, I think that was the calculation of some of the hardliners in Israel and the U.S., in the sense that what they appreciate about Ahmadinejad's victory is that it doesn't conceal the true character of this regime. That's their analysis, that if you were to have a Mousavi presidency, or before when you had a Khatami presidency, it was, in a way, more dangerous because it concealed the true nature of the regime while behind the scenes they were doing all the nefarious things they were doing, in terms of spinning centrifuges, having a covert weapons program, supporting groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. Ahmadinejad brings that all out into the open, which makes it much easier to assemble and retain a robust international sanctions regime against Iran if you have Ahmadinejad as president as opposed to Mousavi as president.

My concern, however, is that sanctions and punitive measures are ultimately not going to bring about any kind of modus vivendi between the United States and Iran, and I think that the option of trying to build confidence and reaching some type of a political accommodation—I thought that was the way to go. I still believe that's the way we should move forward—no matter what happens with these elections, I think

that we need to move forward—and by doing so, by continuing forward with dialogue or engagement or making overtures, and if the Iranians continue not to reciprocate, continue to play hardball, I think there will be far greater costs for them than for us—and in particular for Ayatollah Khomeini himself.

Question: You mentioned the hardliners in Israel and we all read the titles published by Haaretz and others saying yesterday that if Mousavi wins we might regret losing Ahmadinejad. Does that open the door for any military action by Israel?

SADJADPOUR: I think unfortunately that the prospect of some type of military strike on Iran—an Israeli military strike on Iran—increases significantly if Ahmadinejad remains president. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I think that's a reality.

Question: If the outrage against this election, both internally and internationally, continues to mount, isn't that going to be very hard for Obama to meet with these guys when you're seen as legitimizing a government? Or do you only deal with Khomeini and say, I'm not dealing with Ahmadinejad?

SADJADPOUR: That's a good point. I think this is—I tried to say this earlier—we have to wait until the dust settles. And it could take a while for this dust to settle. If we see continued protests in Tehran and the reform camp continues to hold out and there's protesting and there's internal tumult and our allies are not recognizing these elections either, then I think certainly we should not do so. But, if we're in a situation say one month from now or six weeks or two months from now where basically the reformist camp has said they concede defeat and the streets of Tehran are calm, again and it's back to business as usual with

the Chinese and the Russians and the Europeans, then I don't see us as having any other options but to move forward with dialogue.

We have now a huge challenge in Afghanistan, which I don't think anyone believes can be resolved without positive Iranian cooperation. Likewise in Iraq. And then on the nuclear issue, what we learned during the Bush years is that when we didn't talk to them they moved forward with enrichment and it didn't resolve anything.

So when and if we do begin to commence dialogue with this regime, I'm in no way arguing we should come out with flowers and take the same approach as President Obama did in his Nowruz greeting. I think those days are over. Those days of talking of constantly trying to convey respect and being very cordial and friendly toward the Iranian government—I think those days are over. That doesn't mean we need to be belligerent toward them or put them in an axis of evil, but I don't think we should give this regime any public legitimacy which they don't deserve. Let's have a cold, hard dialogue with them like we did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Question: Last follow up—do you think the level of electoral fraud is commensurate to the level of discord in Iran? Under Bush, they seemed totally locked in, it was an easy propaganda game. Then Obama came in and totally flipped the whole game and suddenly the burden is on them. Then the Lebanese elections, which probably didn't make them too happy, then this green revolution that you're talking about suddenly seems to be—did they panic somewhat?

SADJADPOUR: I think that they did. I always think that these things are oftentimes 25th hour decisions based on what happens at the polls and elsewhere, and again as we talked about earlier, I don't think they anticipated this. I think they're in a real bind with Barack Obama, these hardliners, they're

in a real bind to continue to justify this “Death to America” culture of 1979 when you have a president in Washington who’s continually reaching out and making overtures, basically trying to rob the regime of an enemy. I can tell you that I’ve spoken to Iranian officials who are just outraged by this fraud. While on the surface, even two months from now, even if things calm and it looks like business back to normal, I think we may look back at this years as a real flash point, a real turning point, when the rot, the internal rot, really became palpable. Because Ahmadinejad alienated very important factions during this election campaign, he alienated wide swaths of society. So essentially now you have a government which represents a very narrow proportion of not only the population but also, I would argue, the political elite. So these are going to be very tenuous months ahead for the Leader as he carries these burdens on his shoulders.

END.