

Reform Politics and Iran's June Presidential Election

by Farideh Farhi

SUMMARY

Conflicting electoral impulses have again forced the Iranian government to place limitations on the upcoming presidential election in order to deny the candidacies of government outsiders.

Political rivalries among the conservative establishment have prevented the emergence of a "preferred" candidate with considerable popular appeal.

Conservative attempts to purge reformists from the electoral landscape have led to debate and disagreement in the reformist camp over whether and how to participate in the elections.

U.S. policy has focused almost exclusively on a "dual-track" approach to nuclear negotiations, which has cost the Administration leverage and undermined messaging focused on human rights and reform.

Policymakers should consider softening the "pressure track," given that reduced external pressure will likely allow progressive domestic forces more room to maneuver and influence the direction of the country in the long run.

As the Islamic Republic of Iran approaches its eleventh presidential election, the conflicting impulses that have shaped its 34-year life are once again manifest. The constitutional mandate to hold regular elections, whose competitiveness helps legitimize the Islamic Republic and deepen the allegiance of its citizens to the Islamic system, is again confronted with the need to place limitations on the contest in order to prevent the candidacies of those branded as "outsiders."

The upcoming contest comes on the heels of two bruising presidential elections in 2005 and 2009: the former went to a second round, while the latter resulted in large protests and a subsequent crackdown by the security establishment. Ghosts of both cast long shadows on the coming election, though for different reasons. The traditional conservative political establishment is fretting over the possible emergence of another relatively unknown and highly polarizing candidate "not up to the task" of managing the government and economy, as was the case in the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. From this perspective, trouble lies in the possibility of continued economic ruin and international isolation through a combination of populist policies, managerial incompetence, and stridence.

Uncertainty regarding Iran's fluid political environment remains. There exists potential for a large number of votes cast against a "preferred" candidate, even at the last minute. The working assumption is that the electoral environment and the field of candidates will be manipulated to assure that the establishment candidate is elected without tampering on election day. But an "engineered" election was also the plan in 2009, when a presumably washed up and uncharismatic former Prime Minister, Mir Hossein Mousavi, was approved to run against Ahmadinejad, whose populist policies at least assured him support in rural areas and smaller cities. The 85 percent participation rate registered in 2009, which was 22 percent greater than the participation rate in 2005, was unexpected—and grounds for public skepticism and post-election protests.

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Few expect such a high turnout this time around. The Green Movement that mobilized to vote in the 2009 election, and then protested its results, is dormant, if not gone. Mousavi, his spouse Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi remain under house arrest. Accusations of sedition and collusion with outside forces to destabilize the country are openly raised against journalists, politicians, and civil society activists. Disaffection is palpable among a significant sector of urban voters, and there are hints that authorities will welcome a degree of voter apathy in order to secure an uneventful and calm election.

THE DECLINE OF ELITE INFIGHTING?

Some Iranians believe this dynamic suggests an end to the era of domestic political factionalism. They believe that Iran’s internally competitive authoritarianism has transformed into consolidated authoritarianism. They disagree on what this shift implies in terms of the structure of state power, and whether the Islamic Republic has now become a praetorian state or a Leader-led Sultanistic regime. But repeated warnings by a host of security officials regarding the potential for yet further Western-supported “sedition” give credence to the basic argument that the Islamic Republic has fundamentally changed. Elections no longer appear to matter even in the way they did in the past, when participation at least offered a choice among candidates whose policies differed.

Supporters of this view contend that the coming election will only produce a president who is only an avowed believer in the Islamic Republic’s founding ideological principles, which have now found expression exclusively in the person of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Even if other relatively bland and unattractive candidates from across the political spectrum are approved, only this candidate will be “allowed” to win. The challenge that Ahmadinejad has posed to Khamenei in the past two years ensures that Iran’s next president will be someone who is temperamentally subservient to the Leader. In effect, not only does the choice of the president not matter, the presidency itself has lost significance.

This may indeed turn out to be the case, but the country’s current political climate suggests the political landscape is more complex. Among the large number of establishment conservative candidates, no one has emerged as a clear front-runner. Although three prominent conservative candidates—Tehran’s Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, and former Majles Speaker Gholamreza Haddad Adel—have reached an agreement that the one among them with the best poll numbers will run, the broader conservative field cannot agree on a coordinated process of candidate selection. There is uncertainty about whether Ahmadinejad’s preferred candidate, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaie, will be allowed to run. Similar uncertainty exists as to whether a centrist or self-identified reformist candidate will be approved. These factors suggest that, within its own ideological confines, the electoral climate of the Islamic Republic is likely to remain lively and competitive.

Two major unknowns keep the upcoming presidential election worth watching: the identity of the establishment’s preferred candidate, and the extent to which competing views will be permitted on different electoral slates. The government’s

desire to hold at least a seemingly “clean” election in hopes of erasing the memory of 2009 casts doubt on whether the coming election will offer a real choice, as has been the case in previous elections.

THE REFORMIST DILEMMA

Since the mid-1990s, elections and electioneering have been important instruments for reformists to contest state power and disseminate their ideas among the public. But with conservative attempts to purge reformers from power through a variety of mechanisms such as vetting, ideological denunciation, and outright repression, reformists worry that their participation could give the appearance of a competitive election, even when the results have been predetermined. The conviction of many reformists that the manipulation of the 2009 election results served as an “electoral coup” leaves them with few options but to stay out of the electoral process, unless they are given assurances that the election will be fair and free, that reformist leaders will be freed from prison and house arrest, and that their political parties will be allowed to operate without fear of intimidation. Since there are no indications that these assurances will be provided, participation does not seem to be worthwhile.

A call for an electoral boycott, however, may serve no purpose but to hasten the reformists’ own exclusion from the political process. Indeed, this strategy was tried half-heartedly in the parliamentary elections of 2012, with no perceptible impact on the state’s conduct. Reformist self-exclusion in the post-2009 political environment carries the risk of permanent political irrelevance.

But participation also carries risks. By participating, reformists may lose the sympathies they gained from protestors in 2009. Many of these protestors might see reformist participation as a betrayal of Mousavi, Rahnavard, and Karroubi. They insist on an electoral boycott, hoping that it will send a louder message of popular dissatisfaction to intransigent leaders than participation would. But the nature of electoral politics in the Islamic Republic renders a coordinated boycott unfeasible.

The most important reformist political parties are now banned, and their key organizational leaders are still in prison. Yet the debate about what to do remains quite lively. Even a number of imprisoned leaders, such as former Deputy Interior Minister Mostafa Tajzadeh, participate in the conversation through letters smuggled out of prison. Discussions are also taking place among self-identified reformist parties that remain legal, including the National Confidence Party, whose leader Karroubi is still under house arrest. The decision to participate in the election is further complicated by ambivalence regarding whether to coalesce around a single reformist candidate and, if so, what type of candidate. Some argue that reformists should contemplate supporting the approved candidate most likely to move the country away from its securitized environment and towards the political center.

Others disagree, and are seriously mulling a push for former President Mohammad Khatami’s candidacy. In a public letter issued in mid-March, 91

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individuals, including a number of prominent reformists, called on Khatami to announce his candidacy. A day later, the Reformist Front’s Coordination Council, the most important collection of reformist parties and organizations, called upon Khatami to run. Their call was premised on Khatami’s popularity and a belief in the continued attractiveness of his ideas and conduct as President. Support for Khatami’s candidacy signals that a significant number of Iranians would like to see a government that is less culturally rigid, less ideologically aggressive, less politically confrontationist, and more economically competent. Despite Khatami’s flaws, and his timidity in confronting security forces, there is a belief that people will be galvanized by the possibility of his success. His candidacy also increases the chance of disparate reformist factions gathering in support of one candidate. The Guardian Council could disqualify Khatami, but, for supporters of his candidacy, it seems better to impose the cost of his disqualification on the Supreme Leader and his allies.

Khatami himself has remained non-committal, reportedly stating that he does not want to run, but will follow the collective decision of the reformists. In a political environment in which security officials routinely identify Khatami as having aided “sedition” against the Islamic Republic, mere talk of his candidacy challenges these accusations and exposes their use for political purposes.

The broad array of reformist forces can also try to find agreement in supporting a candidate who may not have the broad appeal of Khatami, but whose campaign can bring a degree of coherence to the reformist camp. This is, in effect, the preferred strategy of some who think that a lesser-known candidate who elicits less antagonism from the conservative establishment, such as Mohammad Najafi or Ishaq Jahangiri, would be a better choice. Such a candidate may not win, but could be better for the reform movement’s survival and organizational rejuvenation in the long term.

But, given that the reformists do not know which candidates will be approved, the choice of whom to support may eventually be imposed on them by the calculations of the Guardian Council. The Council may also move to allow only the least appealing or least known reformist candidate. In this way, the Guardian Council can give the impression of a competitive election while underwriting the victory of its preferred conservative candidate. This obstacle will be a challenge for the reformists, since it will likely force them to choose between a centrist- or moderate-conservative candidate (such as former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani) who may have a chance of winning, and a reformist candidate, with little to no chance of winning.

The reality is that eight years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, and the political polarization it has wrought, have again made the presidential election a referendum on the direction of the country, even if the competition ends up being between a conservative and a centrist. Given the economic difficulties the country has faced in the past few years, revitalizing the economy will be the focus of the coming election. This focus will necessarily touch on the question of Iran’s relations with the United States.

REFOCUSING THE “DUAL-TRACK” APPROACH

With its emphasis on coercive diplomacy, the United States’ dual-track approach toward Iran centers simultaneously on pressure in the form of sanctions and incentives in exchange for cooperation. Unfortunately, pressure has eliminated any leverage the U.S. might have had in either convincing Iran to conduct a fair election or influencing its outcome in ways that are conducive to the opening of Iran’s political environment. Economic sanctions and military intimidation have combined to threaten the stability of the Islamic Republic with very predictable results of further securitizing its domestic political environment. U.S. policies are not responsible for what has happened in the past few years in Iran, but they have helped provide a justification for a hard-line turn. The imposition of a broad-based sanctions regime that negatively impacts the economic livelihood of many Iranians has also undermined public opinion of the United States and reinforced perceptions that U.S. policy does not reflect concern for human rights and dignity throughout the Middle East.

The focus on pressure has also deflected attention from and preparation for unexpected results in Iran’s fluid political environment. The Administration’s response to protests and calls for reform in 2009 is a strong example. Though the Administration may have attempted to anticipate different electoral outcomes, it appeared to be caught completely off guard by the extent of unprecedented levels of electoral fraud, continuous demonstrations, and intense infighting within the establishment. In many ways, this lack of foresight and preparation foreshadowed the Administration’s lack of preparedness when protests erupted in Tunisia and swept the Arab world in 2011.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *The State Department, working closely with other U.S. government agencies, should begin preparing detailed responses to different election outcomes.* Despite the closed nature of the electoral process, elections are important moments in Iran. While the establishment might ensure the victory of its preferred candidate, the importance of political competition to the conduct of the elections should not be ignored. Previous reactions to electoral results have been inconsistent and tied too closely to other political considerations, such as nuclear negotiations.
- *Devote greater attention to the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed.* The UN Human Rights Council voted overwhelmingly in favor of extending Shaheed’s term in March, a sign that the UN hopes to focus attention on human rights in the months before and after the presidential elections. The U.S. should push the Council to strengthen Shaheed’s mandate beyond the mere “moral authority” he has now. One option could involve encouraging the Council to pressure Iran to allow Shaheed to visit during or after the elections.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Farideh Farhi is an Independent Scholar and Affiliate Graduate Faculty at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She has taught comparative politics at the University of Colorado, Boulder, University of Hawai'i, University of Tehran, and Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran. Her publications include *States and Urban-Based Revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua* (University of Illinois Press) and numerous articles and book chapters on comparative analyses of revolutions and Iranian politics.

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- ***Avoid using deadlines and military threats to signal the urgency of a diplomatic settlement.*** The timing of the talks that began in Almaty, Kazakhstan, is important. Tehran's agreement to engage in negotiations before the presidential election suggests that the current leadership wishes to take the nuclear talks, and broader relations with the United States, out of domestic politics. But even if the continuation of talks is just a maneuver on the part of Tehran to bring temporary calm for electoral purposes, it is still helpful in undercutting the excuse for securitizing the country and accusing critics of government policies of being engaged in sedition on behalf of Western governments.
- ***Suspend the "pressure track" and offer genuine sanctions relief in negotiations with the Iranian government.*** There are voices, particularly in the Iranian Diaspora, that believe suspending pressure for the sake of nuclear talks will be construed as a reluctance on the part of the U.S. to hasten regime change. But in the more likely case of the regime's survival, suspending pressures and threats and engaging in a give and take process will allow forces of reform more room to maneuver and influence. Suspending pressure may not have a direct impact. Even if it does, the results may not be evident immediately. No country in the world can liberalize or de-securitize in the face of physical threat, and Iran is no exception. It should be evident that a destabilized or further securitized Islamic Republic neither benefits the voices of change in Iran nor serves the interests of the United States.