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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Iranian politics continue to fascinate the rest of the world. Twenty-six years after the Islamic regime came to power, the revolution seems to continue and Iranians are still searching for an appropriate way to realize the aspirations that brought Islamists to power in 1979. In the presidential elections on June 24, the voters chose Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, a man who, more than any other candidate, symbolized adherence to the original principles of the revolution, embodied the changes demanded by the ordinary voters, and reaffirmed the revolution as the solution for their problems.

The system of government has validated itself. Conservatism has again prevailed over its detractors and gained a fresh mandate to heal society's ills. Continuity has again been preserved, as it was following the death in 1989 of Ayatollah Khomeini and the election in 1997 of reformer Mohammad Khatami as president. And Iran has again surprised observers with the nature of its choice and the degree of popular political participation: no other country has gone to the polls as frequently in the last generation – about once a year – at the times stipulated by law and with high turnout rates that the regime interprets as public support and further legitimation for its rule. Within the severe constraints imposed by the regime, the conduct of elections also resembled that of far freer countries and included lively public campaigning by candidates with competing platforms. And notwithstanding the power of the conservatives, the name of the winner could not be predicted in advance – a rather unusual feature of most Middle Eastern elections.

Yet despite the appearance of openness, these were not truly free elections. About 1000 candidates were disqualified by the Council of Guardians; only eight were approved (of whom seven actually ran) – all deemed sufficiently loyal by the regime. Many others, convinced that they would be disqualified, did not even bother submitting their candidacy. In this sense, the outcome was actually predetermined by the Guardian Council and the public only had the

power to list the approved candidates in order of preference. And given the trend in recent years – conservatives consolidated their control of local councils in 2003 elections and won the parliamentary elections in 2004 – it was clear that the conservatives would win the presidency as well. Still, it was not obvious that victory would go to the most conservative of the conservatives. For the first time in its history of presidential elections, Iran went to a second round, in which about 60% of registered voters took part, and only then did Ahmadi-Nejad win, with about 66% of the vote.

Ahmadi-Nejad and his main competitor, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, actually symbolized two extreme poles of a relatively narrow spectrum. The latter, a clergyman and veteran politician from a wealthy family, is one of the pillars of the first generation of the revolution but also a moderate centrist and supporter of reform and modernization. The former, the son of a steelworker, has no formal religious education and stressed, instead, his modest origins and spartan lifestyle. He is a child of the revolution whose worldview was shaped during the Iran-Iraq war, and he came to public notice only after his emergence as Mayor of Tehran in April 2003. Ahmadi-Nejad ran as the representative of the downtrodden who would fight corruption. He scattered Robin Hood-style promises to take from the rich and give to the poor and was supported by the conservative establishment (including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei) and the security organs. But it was mainly his emphasis on Islamic justice and morality, on fairness and modesty that won him widespread public support.

In the short run, the main victor in the elections – apart from Ahmadi-Nejad himself – is the conservative regime, personified by Khamenei. As a result, conservatives once again head both the elected institutions – Majlis, Presidency, local councils – and the unelected echelons – Supreme Leader, judiciary, Guardian Council, religious and military establishments – as well as the revolutionary organs (like the Revolutionary Guards, Foundation of the Oppressed, and Foundation of the Martyrs). After eight years of a reformist presidency (Khatami), during which the Supreme Leader had to contend with the specter of his influential colleague-rival (Rafsanjani), Khamenei now seems to enjoy unprecedented authority after Rafsanjani's stinging defeat and the victory of Ahmadi-Nejad. By contrast, advocates of reform failed to unite behind an agreed candidate. Their call to boycott the election in the first round weakened them further. Their hopes for change from within seem to have been dashed, at least for now.

Ironically, however, the conservatives' undisputed control of all the levers of power may well undermine their standing in the longer run because of growing pressure for results from within or greater tension with the rest of the world. The elections exposed the weakness of the reformist camp, but the support for Ahmadi-Nejad also betrays a certain disillusionment with the revolution. And while Khatami's reform programs actually helped consolidate the revolution during his years in office, the test of performance will now be applied to the conservatives in power. Nor is it likely that the domestic contest has been settled once and for all. On the contrary, the rifts between various factions and schools of thought have widened, as has the gap between the youth and the ruling elite.

All of these factors muddy the waters of Iranian politics, and the picture will

not begin to clear up at least until Ahmadi-Nejad appoints his government and publishes his policy guidelines. There will inevitably be some dissonance between his campaign declarations and his actual policies, because even the most extreme regime must acknowledge the limits of power and accommodate the constraints of reality. But even if change is unavoidable, its pace, direction and price remain unpredictable. With Ahmadi-Nejad's election, the cause of reform in Iran appears to have suffered a serious setback, but it is not yet clear how the country will proceed.

The new President's major test will therefore be two-fold: to unite the public behind his government and include different segments of society in it; and, in the longer run, to "deliver the goods" he generously promised during the campaign to the weaker sectors of the population. The recent rise in the price of oil may help him do this. But that, alone, will not be enough.

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