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Op/Ed: The Causes and Consequences of Iran's June 2005 Presidential Election

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by [Mark Gasiorowski](#)

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Introduction

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardline conservative Islamist, scored a stunning victory in the second round of Iran's June 2005 presidential election. Many observers have described Ahmadinejad's victory as a key turning point for Iran, predicting that it will produce a new era of radical, puritanical rule at home and greater militancy in Iran's foreign policy. However, Iran's new president will face important political obstacles that will limit his ability to act, so it is not clear whether, and to what extent, he will be able to carry out such drastic changes.

This article examines why Ahmadinejad achieved such a decisive victory and what consequences his victory may have for Iranian politics and for Iran's domestic and foreign policy. Its main conclusion is that domestic and international political realities will place substantial limitations on Ahmadinejad, making it harder for him to pursue his agenda in some policy areas than in others. Ahmadinejad's victory probably will have a fairly big impact on domestic economic policy and political conditions inside Iran, but its impact on socio-cultural conditions and foreign policy probably will be more limited.

The Candidates

Close observers of Iran for several years had anticipated that the June 2005 election would produce major change. The pro-democracy reform movement that emerged with the May 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami stalled after several years, weakened by continual attacks from its conservative opponents. Although the reformists managed to achieve landslide victories in the 1999 municipal council elections, the 2000 parliamentary election, and the 2001 presidential election (when Khatami was reelected), they were unable to use their control over these institutions to achieve significant change, either in domestic political conditions or in the economic and socio-cultural conditions that more directly affect common Iranians. As a result, the Iranian public became increasingly disillusioned with Khatami and his reformist allies. This was reflected in the 2003 municipal council elections and the 2004 parliamentary election, when reformist candidates were decisively defeated, amid sharply lower turnout. With Khatami unable

to run for a third term, many observers believed that the reformists would suffer another defeat and turnout again would be low in the June 2005 election.

With their recent defeats in mind, the reformists started to plan for the presidential election in the fall of 2004. The reformist movement had begun to split into a radical wing that believed Iran's Islamic regime could not be reformed and a moderate wing that still believed reform was possible. The moderates began to consider possible candidates, hampered by the fact that most prominent reformists had been ruled ineligible to run for public office by the Council of Guardians, a body that is authorized to vet electoral candidates. Two leading reformist parties, the Islamic Iran Participation Front and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution, finally settled on Mostafa Moin, a little-known former cabinet member. The reformist Militant Clerics Association nominated Hojjatolislam Mehdi Karrubi, who had twice served as speaker of parliament. Radical reformists rejected these nominees, arguing that neither would be very popular and that reformists should either boycott the election or nominate a genuinely popular candidate, even if he or she would be ruled ineligible.

The conservatives also began to prepare for the election. Several conservative candidates stepped forward, including Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister; Ali Larijani, a former head of Iran's state-controlled radio and television monopoly; Mohsen Rezaei, a former head of the paramilitary Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); Mohsen Qalibaf, a former IRGC general and police chief; and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a little-known former IRGC officer, who had been appointed mayor of Tehran after conservatives swept the 2003 Tehran municipal council election. Velayati, Larijani, and to some extent Rezaei had long-standing ties to Iran's traditional conservative elite. Qalibaf and Ahmadinejad were both newcomers to politics, representing a younger generation of conservatives—often called “neo-conservatives”—who had come to power in the 2003 and 2004 elections and in many cases had served in the IRGC or the regular armed forces during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Conservative leaders became increasingly concerned that these candidates would split the pro-conservative vote and thus deny them a chance to win the presidency. They even established a council to choose among the conservative candidates. This council eventually backed Larijani, but none of the other conservative candidates agreed to the council's request that they drop out of the race.

The other major candidate who chose to run was Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, an icon of the Islamic regime who had served as speaker of parliament during 1980-1989 and president during 1989-1997. Rafsanjani had initiated the trend toward moderation that began in 1989, angering Iran's conservatives. However, he was associated with much of the extremism, brutality, and corruption of the 1980s and early 1990s and made little effort to promote political liberalization, so many reformists distrusted him as well. Rafsanjani nurtured a centrist faction during the 1990s, but in Iran's highly polarized society this left him with little popular support. Consequently, his 1989 and 1993 election victories were not overwhelming; and when he tried to make a comeback in the 2000 parliamentary election, he did very poorly and withdrew in humiliation from the race. Rafsanjani publicly toyed with running again for president during the fall of 2004 and winter of 2005, finally declaring his candidacy in early May. Velayati then dropped out of the race in deference to Rafsanjani.

As the May 14 registration deadline approached, over 1,000 candidates entered the race. On May 22 the Council of Guardians disqualified all but six candidates, including Moin, the leading reformist candidate; Ibrahim Yazdi, the highly respected leader of the banned Liberation Movement of Iran; and all female candidates. Moin's disqualification caused a great outcry in the reformist camp, leading Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to instruct the Council to reinstate Moin and a lesser-known reformist candidate, Mohsen Mehralizadeh. This left a wide range of candidates to contest the election, including the reformists Moin, Karrubi, and Mehralizadeh; the centrist Rafsanjani; and the conservatives Larijani, Rezaei, Qalibaf, and Ahmadinejad. Rezaei later dropped out of the race, after floundering in pre-election polls.

The remaining candidates campaigned vigorously, targeting their efforts especially at Iran's large youth population. All of the reformist candidates vowed to continue President Khatami's reform agenda, declaring that they would promote political liberalization, revitalize the economy, and improve Iran's relations with the West. Moin established an alliance with the Liberation Movement and other loyal-opposition forces, hoping to attract their small base of supporters. Karrubi stated that he would give a \$60 per month stipend to all Iranian adults if elected. Rafsanjani declared that he would continue Khatami's reforms and improve ties with the West. Qalibaf tried to shed his image as a hardline IRGC general by waging a populist campaign, declaring that he favored reform and projecting a vigorous, charismatic image. Larijani also talked vaguely about reform, though his campaign was lackluster. Only the hardline conservative Ahmadinejad avoided the language of reform, portraying himself in populist terms as a simple, devoutly religious man who would return Iran to the founding principles of the Islamic regime, reduce the gap between rich and poor, and make no effort to improve Iran's relations with the West.

Pre-election polls generally showed Rafsanjani in the lead but falling far short of the majority of votes needed for a first-round win. Most polls showed either Moin or Qalibaf in second, with the four other candidates trailing well behind. Polls also suggested that turnout would be fairly high, despite calls for a boycott by radical reformists and US-based Iranian exile radio and television stations. Rumors circulated persistently that the security forces might intervene in the election on behalf of one of the conservative candidates—generally thought to be Qalibaf—leading the interior ministry to warn that this would be illegal. A few days before the first round of voting on June 17, U.S. President George W. Bush declared that the election process “ignores the basic requirements of democracy,” angering many Iranians and leading some to call for a high turnout in defiance of Bush's statement.

The First and Second Round Votes

The first-round results were announced on June 18. Rafsanjani won the first round but took only 21 percent of the vote, surprising most observers and ensuring that the election would go to a second round. The biggest surprise was that Ahmadinejad came in second with 19 percent of the vote, followed by Karrubi with 17 percent. Qalibaf and Moin were farther behind, each taking 14 percent, while Larijani and Mehralizadeh took only six and four percent, respectively. Four percent of the ballots were declared invalid. The other big surprise was the 63 percent turnout rate, which was much higher than most observers had expected and close to the 64 percent average turnout rate in the eight previous presidential elections held under Iran's Islamic regime. Most Iranians clearly did not heed the call for a boycott by radical reformists and exiles.

Karrubi quickly charged that the security forces had illegally increased the vote for Ahmadinejad by calling on their personnel to back him, influencing or intimidating voters at polling places, using false identity cards, and even bribing voters. He sharply criticized Khamenei for letting this happen—even alleging that Khamenei's son Mojtaba had been involved—and called on him to initiate a full investigation. Karrubi then resigned from his positions on the powerful Expediency Council, as an advisor to Khamenei, and as a leader of the Militant Clerics Association and pledged to create a new political party. Moin and many other reformists echoed Karrubi's criticism and warned that “fascism” was emerging. Rafsanjani even backed Karrubi and called for an investigation. The Guardian Council merely ordered recounts of 100 ballot boxes in Tehran, finding no evidence of irregularities.

Ahmadinejad's strong showing, his hardline conservative views, and widespread concern that the security forces would interfere in the second round left many Iranians fearful that Ahmadinejad might win and return Iran to the radicalism of the 1980s. As a result, many elites backed Rafsanjani in the days leading up to the second round, which was scheduled for June 24. Karrubi, Moin, and most of the organizations and individuals that had supported them backed Rafsanjani. Emadedin Baghi, a prominent reformist dissident, typified the reaction of many reformists in declaring that he would “hold [his] nose and vote for Rafsanjani.” Rafsanjani appealed to reformist

voters, emphasizing his moderate views and even circulating posters picturing him with Khatami. For his part, Ahmadinejad continued his populist campaign but sought to portray himself as a moderate who would not curtail the liberties many Iranians had come to enjoy under Rafsanjani and Khatami.

As the second round approached, Interior Minister Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari charged that votes were being bought and a “smear campaign” was being waged, clearly implying that hardline conservatives were trying to manipulate the vote in favor of Ahmadinejad. On the day before the second round, the interior ministry arrested 26 people for election violations. Nevertheless, the second round of voting took place as scheduled on June 24.

On the following day, election officials announced that Ahmadinejad had won with 62 percent of the vote, with Rafsanjani taking only 36 percent. Turnout remained surprisingly high at 59 percent, implying that 36 percent of the electorate had supported Ahmadinejad. This outcome was a stunning defeat for both Rafsanjani and the reformists. It completed the sweep of Iran’s elected offices by the “neo-conservatives,” which had begun with the 2003 municipal council elections and continued with the 2004 parliamentary election. And it left Iran’s future very uncertain.

Why Did Ahmadinejad Win?

No concrete evidence of large-scale electoral manipulation in either the first or the second round of voting has yet emerged. It seems likely that whatever manipulation did occur in the first round mainly had the effect of drawing votes away from the other conservative candidates to Ahmadinejad. This shift in conservative support to Ahmadinejad may perhaps have been enough to push Karrubi from second to third place and therefore may have had a decisive impact on the outcome of the election. However, support for Karrubi also was undermined by the presence of two other reformist candidates on the ballot in the first round, splitting the pro-reformist vote. Moreover, the three conservative candidates together outpolled the three reformist candidates by a margin of 39 to 35 percent, so it is not inappropriate that a conservative advanced to the second round. Ahmadinejad won the second round by a large margin, so electoral manipulation cannot have had a decisive impact on the second-round vote. Consequently, while some electoral manipulation may well have occurred, it would be a mistake to identify this as the main reason for Ahmadinejad’s victory.

Rather, three trends in Iranian public opinion seem to have been responsible. First, Ahmadinejad’s campaign emphasized the growing gap between Iran’s rich and poor, the widespread corruption and rent-seeking that exist there, and his own humble lifestyle. These themes were especially prominent in the days leading up to the second round. They seem to have brought large numbers of lower class and lower-middle class voters into Ahmadinejad’s camp, including many who do not necessarily support his hardline views on political, socio-cultural, and foreign policy matters. This rapid, rather superficial shift of support to Ahmadinejad helps explain why 36 percent of the electorate voted for him in the second round, after only 12 percent had supported him in the first round and an additional 13 percent had supported the other two conservative candidates. Ahmadinejad’s emphasis on inequality and corruption represents a rejection of the Rafsanjani and Khatami years, when these problems presumably emerged. However, it is worth emphasizing that Iran’s macroeconomic performance has been fairly positive and income inequality has been stable in recent years, so the growing gap between rich and poor may reflect popular perceptions and mythology more than reality.

Second, Ahmadinejad’s victory to some extent represents a backlash among conservative Iranians against the extensive socio-cultural liberalization that has occurred in the past 10-15 years, especially the much more relaxed standards of dress for women and widespread public romantic activity and other forms of gender mixing. The gap between Iranians who support and oppose this socio-cultural liberalization largely parallels the rich-poor gap, so it is difficult to say

how much the election of Ahmadinejad reflects concern among his supporters about one or the other of these gaps. However, the strong emphasis on inequality and corruption in Ahmadinejad's campaign and the rapid shift of support to him between the first and second rounds suggest that the rich-poor gap probably had a much bigger impact.

Finally, Ahmadinejad clearly benefited from public resentment toward Rafsanjani and the reformists. As discussed above, Rafsanjani has never been very popular; and it was widely alleged during the campaign that he and his family had amassed a large fortune and committed other improprieties. Support for reformist candidates fell sharply after the 2001 election, as they failed to accomplish their objectives; and their inability to field a popular candidate in this election hurt them further. Consequently, while Khatami had been supported by 57 percent of the electorate in 1997 and 49 percent in 2001, only 22 percent of the electorate backed the three reformist candidates in the first round in 2005. The turnout rate also was 63 percent in 2001, so many of Khatami's supporters then voted in the first round of this election either for Rafsanjani, who took 13 percent of the electorate, or for one of the conservative candidates, who together took only 14 percent in 2001 but 25 percent in 2005. (There were no real centrist candidates in 2001.) Rafsanjani's vote share grew from 13 percent of the electorate in the first round of this election to only 21 percent in the second round, implying that he picked up less than half of the reformists' first-round supporters. While some of these reformist supporters abstained in the second round, many—probably Karrubi supporters, for the most part—clearly voted for Ahmadinejad. This stunning shift indicates both the depth of public opposition toward Rafsanjani and the shallowness and cynicism of many reformist supporters.

These trends in public opinion should not be exaggerated. In the first round of voting, 22 percent of the electorate supported reformists, 13 percent supported a centrist (Rafsanjani), 25 percent supported conservatives (who, with the exception of Ahmadinejad, deemphasized their conservative views), and the remaining 41 percent cast invalid ballots or did not vote. Perhaps half of the non-voters had supported Khatami in 1997 but now believe that the Islamic regime cannot be reformed to their liking, while the other half are essentially apolitical. As discussed above, while Ahmadinejad picked up many reformist supporters in the second round, this was a superficial shift, triggered mainly by his populist campaign and widespread opposition to Rafsanjani.

These figures indicate that the Iranian electorate is highly polarized, with 40 to 45 percent favoring fundamental reform or opposing the Islamic regime altogether; 20 to 25 percent favoring the status quo or a return to more conservative principles; only 10 to 15 percent favoring the gradualist approach advocated by centrists like Rafsanjani; and perhaps 20 percent being essentially apolitical. These figures indicate some change from the height of the Khatami era, when 50 to 55 percent of the electorate supported reformists and only 15 to 20 percent supported conservatives. But they certainly do not represent a "realignment" in favor of the conservatives. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that this election might have had a very different outcome if the reformists had nominated an attractive candidate (like Mir Hossein Musavi, a former prime minister), if any one of the three reformist candidates had dropped out, or if Rafsanjani had not run.

Consequences for Iranian Politics

Ahmadinejad is likely to be a weak president. He has little political experience, having served in public office only as mayor of Tehran since 2003 and, before that, as governor of a minor province. Indeed, he was appointed to both of these positions; his presidential campaign was his first run for elected office. Moreover, it seems clear from his public statements that he is fairly naïve, with a simplistic understanding of Iran's political realities and the challenges of governing a complex, modern society. As discussed above, the election results indicate that there is not a large constituency for the hardline measures many observers fear he will pursue. Finally, the

presidency has become much weaker under Khatami, so Ahmadinejad will have little ability to act independently.

Rather than Ahmadinejad, Supreme Leader Khamenei was the real winner in this election. Like President Khatami, Ahmadinejad will be very visible but not very powerful as president, and it seems unlikely that he will challenge Khamenei on important issues. Khamenei's main rivals—Rafsanjani and the reformist movement—have been decisively defeated. Rafsanjani is 70 years old and is not likely to play a major role in Iran's future. Even if the reformists recover from their defeat, they probably will not wield much influence at least until the next parliamentary elections, in early 2008. With Rafsanjani and the reformists on the sidelines, Khamenei essentially will control all of Iran's government institutions. This will give him almost a monopoly on state power—a situation that is unprecedented in the 26 years of Iran's Islamic regime.

However, the great popularity of the reform movement several years ago and the poor performance of the two main establishment candidates, Rafsanjani and Larijani, in this election indicate that most Iranians remain quite unhappy about conditions in their country. Thus, while Khamenei now will be very powerful, he also will face considerable popular discontent. Indeed, conditions in Iran in some ways will resemble the situation that prevailed there in the mid-1970s, at the heyday of the last monarch: state power will be highly centralized in the hands of a single person; discontent will be fairly high, though unfocused; and representative institutions that could effectively channel this discontent will be weak. This does not mean that another revolution is in the making, to be sure. But Iran's future is very uncertain.

The key element of uncertainty is whether the large number of disillusioned Iranians—especially young people—will become more active politically. Iranians who favor fundamental reform or oppose the Islamic regime altogether have maintained a posture of sullen passivity in recent years, demonstrating their discontent verbally, in their electoral behavior, and through their increasingly liberal lifestyles, but refusing to come out into the streets or otherwise become more involved in politics. They have maintained this posture for two main reasons. First, there is widespread concern in Iran that even a peaceful mass protest movement would be harshly suppressed by the security forces. Second, President Khatami and most other reformist leaders have deliberately discouraged their supporters from becoming more active, mainly because they fear the repression that would likely result. The relatively high turnout in this election, despite calls for a boycott by many opposition figures, and the large second-round vote for Ahmadinejad suggest that Iranians today are no more likely than in the recent past to become more active politically.

It is not clear what, if anything, might change this. Khamenei and the leaders of Iran's security forces undoubtedly have been emboldened by Ahmadinejad's victory and the defeat of Rafsanjani and the reformists, so they are even more likely now to suppress popular unrest if it emerges. The reformist leadership and other opposition elements are deeply divided, both between radicals and moderates and along personal lines. During the next several months they will assess the new situation and decide what to do. One possibility is a "grand alliance" of moderate and radical reformists, centrists, and religious-nationalists, which began to emerge during the election campaign. However, the tensions that now exist among opposition leaders make such a "grand alliance" unlikely. And it remains to be seen whether common Iranians can be roused from their posture of sullen passivity and persuaded to support such an alliance.

Consequently, the prospects for a popular uprising in Iran like those that have occurred recently in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan seem very remote, at least for the foreseeable future. During the past few years, advocates of regime change in Iran have not been able to identify credible forces or even strategies that might be able to topple the Islamic regime. The possibility of regime change seems even less likely now, in the aftermath of the presidential election.

Consequences for Domestic and Foreign Policy

With Supreme Leader Khamenei now firmly in control, Iran's domestic and foreign policy in general are likely to be less extreme than many observers predicted immediately after Ahmadinejad's victory.

Khamenei has proven to be an astute politician, understanding the diverse political currents that flow in Iran and navigating effectively through them—until now, at least. Although he largely opposed the reforms Khatami and his allies were promoting, he knew these reforms were very popular and therefore allowed some to go forward that did not threaten his own position or the integrity of the Islamic regime. This created a “safety valve” that reduced popular unrest, while preventing the reformists from benefiting politically from their efforts. Although Ahmadinejad's neo-conservative supporters have been energized by his election, Khamenei understands that this is a relatively small constituency and that many more Iranians favor reform of one sort or another. Therefore, he is likely to restrain efforts by Ahmadinejad and his allies to roll back popular reforms and give them a freer hand on matters that are popular or less controversial.

For this reason, the biggest impact of Ahmadinejad's victory is likely to fall on domestic economic policy. Ahmadinejad's presidential campaign emphasized populist economic measures like interest-free loans for newlyweds and other needy people, higher subsidies for basic consumer goods, and a crackdown on corruption and rent-seeking by state officials. Voters clearly responded to these ideas and high oil prices make them feasible, so measures of this sort are likely to be implemented. Ahmadinejad's allies in parliament have taken steps to block foreign investment and gut key parts of President Khatami's five-year development plan. Most Iranians have little understanding of these matters and are not alarmed by them, so parliament is likely to continue acting in this manner. In addition, Ahmadinejad and his allies may oppose the tariff reductions and other economic reforms that will be required for Iran to join the World Trade Organization. These populist and protectionist economic measures will be harmful but not catastrophic for Iran's economy, benefiting many Iranians in the short term but slowing economic growth and therefore undermining the country's prosperity in the longer term. With oil prices expected to remain high at least for several years, it may be some time before Iranians feel the adverse effects of these measures.

Ahmadinejad's victory also probably will produce a harsher domestic political climate in Iran. The reformists have focused mainly on promoting democracy and improving human rights in recent years, and these themes were central to Moin's campaign. The reformists' declining popularity and Moin's poor showing in the election indicate that these issues are not a high priority for most Iranians. Indeed, Ahmadinejad famously said “Iran did not have a revolution to have democracy” during the campaign, yet he was elected overwhelmingly. With the security forces and the judiciary controlled by Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and their allies, and without a large constituency actively pushing for democracy and human rights, repression is likely to increase in the next few years. This is especially likely to occur if a “grand alliance” of opposition forces or a mass protest movement emerges and threatens the conservatives' control.

Khamenei is most likely to restrain Ahmadinejad and his allies on socio-cultural issues, especially on standards of dress, gender mixing, and other personal matters, which have loosened considerably in recent years. This socio-cultural liberalization has been the main “safety valve” that has reduced popular unrest in Iran, especially among young people. Khamenei certainly is aware of this and is not likely to risk aggravating unrest by permitting a major reversal of this liberalization. Ahmadinejad probably will carry out at least token crackdowns on dress-code violations and gender-mixing. He may also promote socio-cultural changes that do not directly affect personal liberties, such as expanding religious education and controlling the cultural content of the media and arts more carefully. And, indeed, the trend toward greater socio-cultural liberalization probably will end, at least for now. However, a reversion to the strict standards of the 1980s seems unlikely.

Finally, Ahmadinejad's victory may not affect Iran's foreign policy as much as many observers believe. Khamenei knows that many Iranians want better relations with the West, and he realizes that the United States and its allies could do considerable harm to Iran by expanding economic sanctions or using military force against it. Consequently, it seems likely that he will try to avoid a confrontation with the United States and prevent the European Union (EU) countries from joining the United States in imposing economic sanctions on Iran. This suggests that Khamenei at least will try to string out Iran's ongoing negotiations with the EU over its nuclear development program, and there is still some possibility that Iran will reach an agreement with the EU on this matter. In addition, the bombings that killed 10 people in Iran in early June, which were almost certainly perpetrated by Iraqi Ba'athists or al-Qaeda affiliates, were a reminder that Iran and the West have similar interests in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other regional matters, at least in the short term. Quiet or even overt cooperation on these matters therefore remains possible. Nevertheless, the tone of Iran's relations with the West is likely to be more hostile under Ahmadinejad than if Rafsanjani had been elected, and the substance may be adversely affected as well.

About the Author

Mark Gasiorowski is Professor of Political Science and Director of the International Studies Program at Louisiana State University. He has traveled to Iran many times to teach and conduct research, most recently during the first and second rounds of the June 2005 presidential election.

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