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Prospects for reform?: the Iranian elections: style over substance: improving the image of Iran

Report

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Style over Substance: Improving the Image of Iran

The most important and often overlooked thing to remember about Iranian presidential elections is that they will not result in a revamping of the Iran political system. In Western analysis of Iranian elections there is a consistent habit of defining Iranian presidential candidates in black-and-white terms, as though particular individuals exist who are indelibly inclined toward the sort of progress that would drastically reconfigure the Iranian system as it exists today. In 2005 this took the form of portraying Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as a “moderate” and even in some reports as a “reformed progressive”, and portraying Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a “hardline conservative.”



This year, the monikers are equally compelling: Ahmadinejad is now the “principlist conservative” and the top contenders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi are “reformists,” though both have clearly made inroads toward grasping as much as possible of the “principlist” voter block. The trouble is not necessarily in the inaccuracy of these political titles, but rather in the effect that this has of distorting the resumés of these candidates: not one of these top candidates is anything less than establishment by Islamic Republic standards. The vetting process for elections in Iran – whether they be provincial, parliamentary, or presidential – ensures that. The point of these elections is not to change the system but rather to adjust the country’s message, both to Iranians and to the world. This election, more than any in recent memory, is a public relations campaign to improve the image of the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian public – now fully aware of these circumstances – has this year adjusted itself as well. The fallen icon of the reformist movement, former President Mohammad Khatami, still has his followers amongst reform-minded Iranians, though none of them are under any illusions about his own definition of reform. In 1997, when Khatami first won the presidency, “reform” meant “changing the system”. It meant allowing a free press, relaxing morality controls on the public, tolerating protest and dissent. In 1999, that euphoric ideal of the possibilities for change in Iran was quashed. The biggest nationwide demonstrations to take place since the Revolution itself were motivated by Khatami’s failure to put a stop to the aggressive attack on the semi-free press that had seized its opportunity in the two years since his election. Hundreds of newspapers were shutdown. Hundreds of journalists were arrested. Khatami did not defend the journalists or the students. In fact, he did the opposite. In 2009, “reform” has taken on a new definition in Iranian politics. It does not seek a new form of government and it does not assume rights. Instead, it has re-characterized the ambitions of ex-Khatami-reformists as a movement to make the Islamic Republic more humane in the eyes of the world, along the way loosening the government’s grip on people’s lives, while proclaiming that Islam and government can coexist peacefully and democratically in contemporary Iran.

Today, “reform” – at least on the campaign trail – means upholding an Islamic government through revising its constitution and laws to better accord with international standards of human rights. The



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symbolic leader of this movement is the 2003 Nobel Prize laureate and lawyer Shirin Ebadi, who frequently states that as a practicing Muslim she has no qualms about the capacity for Islamic law to coexist humanely with governance in Iran. The foot-soldiers are the countless women and men who have developed an elaborate network of dissent throughout Iran to make their case to the world. The Western-tainted word "democracy" has been replaced with the universal concept of "human rights" and the issue at hand is demonstrating that in the Islamic world, the ideal form of government is Islamically humane.



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran since 1989, is the central authority in the Iranian Government.

The particular attention that Ahmadinejad and his opponents have paid to issues pertaining to rights is novel this year. Mehdi Karrubi, a cleric, created a brief fuss when he announced that the execution of juvenile offenders in Iran should be banned. He later announced that pressing for equal rights for women would be a priority for his administration. Ahmadinejad openly asked for a fair trial for a journalist accused of espionage. Mousavi has placated ethnic minorities and in May 2009 took the opportunity to publicly state his support for "freedom of speech and press" when a Khatami-era pro-reformist daily, *Yas-e No* (New Jasmine), was re-started after six years then promptly re-banned.

The fourth vetted candidate, Mohsen Rezaee, a former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who represents the factional divisions amongst Iranian conservatives, has had less to say on rights issues and may even drop out from the race as he did in 2005. So far his only contribution to the campaign dialogue has been to suggest a slight inclination toward détente with the United States. His ability to participate in any sort of détente is in serious doubt however, considering his inclusion on Interpol's wanted list and a ban against him travelling to the United States and the European Union.

Unfortunately, all of the candidates have a less-than-stellar record when it comes to universal rights and, aside from random acts of rhetoric, have had very little to say or show on the substantial issues that concern most Iranians on this front: equality under the law for women, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and due process under the law and in the courts. In fact, their insistence on reinforcing their revolutionary credentials and in some cases invoking their proximity to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his values demonstrates a return to the early days of the Republic, when the idyll of Islamic governance was still firmly in place. This significant turning point in Iranian history is, then, an election less about substantial change and more about a changed message: a new image for an old Islamic Republic.

In the competition between Ahmadinejad's top opponents, neither Mousavi nor Karrubi has demonstrated a strict commitment to liberal and progressive political values, neither will undertake a foreign policy that is drastically different from the one currently set in motion, and both have underwhelming plans for how they will shoulder Iran's massive economic shortfall. Both are ghosts of the past venturing forward to redefine the original intentions of the Islamic Republic, and their long and

well-known history of discord with Supreme Leader Khamenei attests to that.

Their most obvious difference is in persona. Mousavi, the last Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic before the office was constitutionally eliminated, is soft-spoken and measured in his tone, giving little away in terms of his exact positions and stance on major issues. As senior advisor to the famously reticent former President Khatami, it seems likely that this measured approach was and would be a reflection of his own *modus operandus* – an approach that ultimately led to Khatami’s failure to deliver on any of his campaign promises for a more open society, and in fact opened the door to further repression. Mousavi has taken the unusual step of highlighting his well-educated wife in his campaigning: Dr. Zahra Rahnavard was until 2006 Chancellor of Al Zahra University in Tehran, Iran’s only all-female university, and she is frequently seen not only by Mousavi’s side stating her support for women’s and other rights issues, but also holding his hand. It is a subtle but clear message about Mousavi’s real or imagined proximity to the issue of women’s rights in Iran, which should be considered in conjunction with his own repeated characterization of himself as “a reformist who goes back to principles”: a reinforcement of the new message of an Islamic but humane republic.

On the world stage, as the United States presses ahead in its complex battle against the Taliban to Iran’s East and the Iraqi turmoil to Iran’s West, a toned-down candidate like Mousavi would be a more presentable counterpart for the Americans over the next few years.

Karrubi, on the other hand, is outspoken on a number of issues, as he was during his time as Speaker of Parliament. His misgivings about the Guardian Council and its process of vetting candidates for Iranian elections made international headlines in 2005 when he wrote two letters to the Supreme Leader, accusing his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, and the Guardian Council of participating in massive election fraud, leading to Karrubi’s first-round election loss. In the past, he has openly agitated for the rights of political prisoners and made prison visits when even then-President Khatami would not. This puts him in direct contrast to Mousavi’s most obvious shortcoming: the fact of his premiership during the entire period of Iran’s bloodiest purging of political dissidents when, from 1981-1988, thousands of political dissidents of all stripes were summarily executed in prisons across Iran. Karrubi has his own shortcomings, not least the journalism community’s still-fresh memories of his role in 2000 in preventing the parliament from debating revisions to the strict Press Law.

There are some critics who say that Karrubi is just an angry old man taking a last stand, but the fact is that the political party he started in 2005 after his election loss, the Etemaad-e Melli (National Trust), has a newspaper of the same name that is the most widely read reformist daily in Iran today. His self-proclaimed “moderate” approach and platform have a considerable following across the Iranian spectrum. What he gains in media exposure he loses as all the candidates do in comparison with Ahmadinejad: charisma and a vast organizational network to support his campaign.

Ahmadinejad is in fact a more transparent image of the Islamic Republic’s values compared with his top opponents in the election, and therein lies his biggest problem. His opponents have criticized his aggressive stance on foreign policy and his management style which has exposed the shortcomings of the Office of the President. There is also the problem of Iran’s current economic woes – including official estimates of inflation at around 25% and unemployment at 15%, both of which are in reality almost certainly higher. Karrubi has promised a distribution of Iran’s oil company shares. Mousavi has pointed to his economic record during the war years. Ahmadinejad has handed out \$50 gift vouchers to Tehran University students.

While none of the top candidates has presented a foreign policy or domestic platform which is

anything more than a tweak away from Ahmadinejad's, the issue again is one of image. As Mousavi stated most succinctly, his opponents believe Ahmadinejad's policies are "harmful to the Revolution, the country, and its good name." They promise to avoid these mistakes and present a better image to the public and the world.

Despite the limited choices before them, the Iranian public is wiser today than ever before and, having survived the dissident crackdowns of the Khatami era and the repression that continued under the Ahmadinejad government, they seem on course to continue agitating for their rights. The women's rights movement has been the most vocal in recent years and the Guardian Council's first-ever concession to allow women to run for President resulted in 42 women out of nearly 500 people registering to be vetted as candidates. In the end, however, not one of the women passed the vetting process to be able to actually campaign. Nonetheless, the chirpings for women's rights amongst some of the top candidates signifies the establishment's acceptance that the female vote can make or break this election for any candidate, as it has done over the last decade of regional, parliamentary and presidential elections.

In a highly polarized Iran where even the conservatives have clear divisions, it is unlikely that any candidate will win the 51% of the popular vote necessary to avoid a June 19th second-round run-off. What is certain is that the economy is in a shambles, public tension is at a post-war peak, and no amount of demagoguery on either end of the political spectrum will convince the Iranian public to put the nation ahead of themselves. The voters want jobs, rights, and peace of mind. It remains to be seen whether their votes will count.