LSE Ideas

Situation Analysis

Iran After the Elections

Just hours after polls closed on June 12, the Guardian Council announced that in the Iranian Presidential election: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won an astonishing 62% of the vote. Shortly after that, the major thoroughfares of Iran filled with demonstrators and 30 years of grievance poured into the streets.

These are the protests that will finally effect significant change in the Islamic Republic, the result of a sense of panic within the regime that appears to have led to the manufacturing of electoral results on a massive scale. A full analysis of the results is not yet possible, but a preliminary academic study of the official results has shown that turnout in some provinces topped 100%, and that in a third of all provinces Ahmadinejad would have had to claim up to 44% of all former reformist voters in addition to sweeping the board with former conservative and former centrist voters.[1]

The protests that have resulted are the next and perhaps most difficult stage of a century of mass movements geared toward bringing democratic principles to Iran and reigning in the clerical elites' domination of power in Iran. From the 1906 Constitutional Revolution to the removal of the Qajar dynasty in the mid-1920s, the nationalist uprising of the early-1950s, the 1979 Revolution and all the way through to the 1999 student demonstrations, Iranian resistance has been a consistent struggle to take Iran's governance out of the hands of the few and into the hands of the many. At each stage, the overriding objective has been to create a government that is accountable to its people.

Under the Islamic Republic in particular, the decreasing value placed on public opinion and participation in government decisions has been transparent. In the weeks ahead of the 2009 election, years of discontent with this control was fomented in the public rallies of Mousavi's 'green campaign' and the openness of the Presidential debates. People on both sides of the political spectrum suddenly got into the long-suppressed habit of making their views known publicly. It was never going to be easy to put an abrupt halt to such freedom of expression once the votes had been cast.

The campaign platforms, which were dominated not only by the obvious economic issues but also by civil rights, have subsequently continued on the streets. Discontent on issues of gender discrimination, judicial transparency, paramilitary intrusion, international isolation, and religious control have combined with a highly questionable election result to trigger levels of anger and social unrest not seen since the revolution.

The Supreme Leader himself has been openly defied for the first time ever, not only by the people on the streets but also a select few establishment elites. With an economy facing heights of inflation and unemployment, a government that responds to protests with force and by imposing further limitations on social freedoms is likely to face an increasing number of Iranians with little to lose and everything to gain from agitating for change.

What remains to be seen is how exactly this system will be changed. That will depend on the opposition's continued defiance as well as the public and persistent support of some establishment elites. The people's opposition since the election has been coupled with vocal demands that Mir Hossein Mousavi publicly support the opposition and stand by them as they call for change. He is being thrust into the role of opposition leader and many believe that a significant reason he has embraced this position is his religio-feminist wife, Dr. Zahra Rahnavard. Formerly an establishment figure, since the election Mousavi has definitively sided with the opposition on two points: that the election results were questionable and that people have a right to peacefully protest. His support must persist and broaden if any semblance of coherence is to remain on the side of the opposition.

It is now clear that the Islamic Republic is in the midst of a final showdown within its once relatively cohesive but now factionalized establishment. Ever since the attempts at reform of the late 1990s, the establishment

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1 Ali Ansari, Daniel Berman and Thomas Rintoul, "Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election", Chatham House and the Institute of Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews, 21 June 2009

had become divided along one significant line: whether or not to open the Iranian system. Back then, so-called reformists claimed they sought better international relations and a loosening of strict moral controls. But when the 1999 student demonstrations brought all the problems to a head, then-President Khatami failed to support the people and the myth of reform was debunked.

By the time of the 2008 parliamentary elections the conservatives further split into "principlists" who adhere to the fundamental principles of the Khomeini doctrine and "moderate conservatives" who agreed with the Khomeini doctrine but sought revisions to reflect contemporary changes in domestic and international politics. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ahmadinejad led the principlist camp. Former President Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and former top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani led the moderate conservatives.

Rafsanjani and Larijani have echoed Mousavi's discontent but not openly supported the opposition public and their protests. Larijani, now Speaker of Parliament, has twice since the election added his voice to the opposition stance, denouncing paramilitary attacks on dormitories at Tehran University and criticizing the Supreme Leader for "taking sides" during his definitive Friday prayer speech, a week to the day following the election.

Rafsanjani, the current head of the Assembly of Experts which has the power to appoint or remove the Supreme Leader, was more outspoken ahead of the election when he wrote an open letter to Khamenei warning that "You can stop the bubbling of a spring with just a shovel, but when the water gathers up, you can't stop it with any amount of force", a reference to Ahmadinejad's statements against him in the pre-election debates. Post-

election, his voice can be heard through his family - his daughter Faezeh's brief detention during a protest in Tehran, just days after the Supreme Leader announced that all demonstrations are prohibited, was a clear statement of warning by the establishment.

The initial objective of the alliance of moderate conservatives and the old reformists was to oust Ahmadinejad. But the days before and after the election hints at something further: a distinct inclination toward weakening the Supreme Leadership itself. As incoming Professor of International Relations at LSE Fawaz Gerges noted last week, the ruling mullahs are swimming against the dominant current of Iranian society. In fact, there are already reports of a possibility that behind the scenes, Rafsanjani and the Assembly of Experts are seriously discussing changes to the Supreme Leadership – not eliminating it but opening it up to a Supreme Leadership council of elders which would include Khamenei but remove his singular powers.

Further changes that could take place pertain to the powerful Guardian Council – the 12-member mostly clerical body wherein half of the members are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader and the other half indirectly appointed by him. The Council is best known for its role in vetting political candidates for elections in Iran and there is a possibility that its powers could be reduced.

These two changes alone would make a significant difference in opening up the Islamic Republic system to a rule of governance that is less centralized. This might be enough to satisfy the protesters, as their primary objective is less to instantly eliminate the Islamic Republic than to change it in such a way that opens it up to further improvements by the people.

As hundreds of opposition leaders, journalists and backers continue to be arrested and killed in the streets, and establishment elites call for martyrdom in the opposition struggle, for the first time ever, the cracks in the establishment are now wide enough for the world to see. Even more remarkable is that this time the protesters aren't only students – they are older Iranians who participated in the 1979 Revolution, they are the families of war martyrs who never could have imagined they'd rise in fury against the Islamic Republic, they are civil servants and homemakers, businessmen and women, people of all ages and all backgrounds. As the street protests continue to be quashed, there is a growing possibility of general strikes, including amongst civil servants and possibly even the Bazaar itself, all of which would further unite the Iranian people toward effecting change.

As the establishment's legitimacy continues to dissipate, its only weapon is the long-standing Iranian suspicion of the Western threat. President Obama has led Western governments in remaining disengaged from the details of the election itself, instead focusing on firmly supporting the rights of peaceful demonstrators and admonishing violence against them. In contrast to his predecessor, he has successfully avoided giving the Iranian establishment an opportunity to prove that the United States is interfering in its affairs, thereby weakening it.

The Islamic Republic as it stood before June 12, 2009 is no longer. What comes next will undoubtedly be better for the Iranian people, it is now a matter of when and how much.