



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

THE 2013 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN IRAN

BY SARA BAZOUBANDI

For two years after Iran's presidential election of 2009, in which millions protested Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second-term win, the president enjoyed the unlimited power accorded him by Ayatollah Khamenei over the economic and political policies of the country. However, disagreements began to surface between the two over a number of issues in 2011, including Ahmadinejad's April attempt to dismiss the Minister of Intelligence, who was then reinstated by the Supreme Leader. The political divide between them widened further when Khamenei proposed a radical constitutional change to abolish the presidency in October, saying, "If deemed appropriate, Iran could do without a president." The Supreme Leader's statement prompted former president and opposition leader Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to publicly state, "The proposal strongly undermines the ideal of an Islamic republic, in which the people elect their leaders." Under Khamenei's proposal, the Supreme Leader would rule Iran by working in tandem with the parliament, which would continue to be democratically elected and would appoint one of its members to serve as the executive power.¹

A new parliament was elected in Iran in March 2012. Ahmadinejad had clashed with the previous parliament on a number of occasions regarding his administration's targeted payments of government subsidies, withdrawals from foreign exchange reserves, and widespread corruption. In the year leading up to the elections, a series of Ahmadinejad supporters were edged out of parliamentary roles through fraud cases brought against them. Ahmadinejad himself was summoned for a parliamentary hearing on 14

¹ Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's Supreme Leader Floats Proposal to Abolish Presidency," *Washington Post*, 25 October 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/irans-supreme-leader-floats-proposal-to-abolish-presidency/2011/10/25/gIQAAsOUKGM_story.html, accessed 15 August 2012.

March 2012 to answer questions related to his handling of the economy and to face accusations of his disobedience to the Supreme Leader. Parliament could have impeached Ahmadinejad if his explanations were unconvincing, but doing so would have required Khamenei's unofficial approval. Despite the power struggle and Khamenei's proposal to eliminate the role of the president, Ahmadinejad remained in his position. The Supreme Leader likely retained the status quo due to his fundamental view that the "enemies of the revolution" (the United States and Israel) would see any divide within the Islamic revolutionary establishment as an obvious sign of internal political instability and weakness.

Iranian reform movement in hibernation

While Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader were battling it out, the reform movement was being heavily pressured. The leaders of the Green Movement—Mir-Hossein Moussavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and their wives—have been under house arrest since February 2011, which has left a vacuum in the opposition's leadership. Though the absence of effective leadership in the reform movement has played an important role in calming social unrest since people have not been protesting without the leaders, the effect of the economic struggle imposed by the sanctions against Iran cannot be ignored, as it is another factor silencing the opposition. Economic hardship has dramatically weakened the middle class, which has historically been the backbone of the opposition and which found room to prosper under some of the government's economic policies during the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations. Iranian society has been effectively divided into three groups: the indifferent rich, the urban and the rural poor, and the silent urban middle class. The third group is fading, moving into the second group as the gap between the rich and the poor widens. Needless to say, with economic pressure on middle class Iranians, the imprisonment of most of the reformist political activists and the heads of student movements, and the isolation of the leaders, the opposition movement is likely to fall into a long period of hibernation.

2013 presidential election

The parliamentary elections of March 2012 were the first act in a play showcasing the most controversial political transition in Iran since June 2009; the presidential elections of June 2013 will constitute the final act. While the actual composition of the parliament did not change much, the political ambience has shifted to Ahmadinejad's disadvantage. Since the widespread crackdown on the reform activists in 2009 it has become more apparent that

the Supreme Leader favors a single power political system with little challenge from the parliament or the presidential palace to his ultimate authority—and he has successfully arranged the parliament in his own favor. The support that the Supreme Leader now has from the parliament not only decreases the president's authority but also facilitates the selection of the next Supreme Leader, who, it is speculated, will be picked by the Ayatollah himself.² A principal way for the Supreme Leader to cement this power is via the 2013 presidential election.

The unpredictable events of the past few years demonstrate the difficulty of forecasting political events in Iran; however, a number of potential sequences of events can be reasonably imagined in regard to the election:

1- The Supreme Leader's unconditional victory: In this scenario, Ayatollah Khamenei will support one of his close allies and nurture him for the position while Ahmadinejad-supported candidates and those who are backed by the reformist camp will not receive the approval of the Guardian Council to run. In addition to the influence of the Guardian Council, the general disappointment of the Iranian public from the previous presidential election crisis will lead to low voter participation, which would work in the best interest of the Supreme Leader and his preferred candidate, as lower participation would allow an easier manipulation of the ballot box. Many are speculating about the Supreme Leader's favored replacement; the best known are the two former speakers of the parliament, Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, who is Mojtaba Khamenei's (Ayatollah Khamenei's son) father-in-law, and Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri.

2- The Supreme Leader's disputed victory: A pro-Ahmadinejad rival will challenge Ayatollah Khamenei's supported candidate. The Supreme Leader may choose to let the Guardian Council issue approval for an Ahmadinejad-backed candidate to avoid controversy over the transparency of the election, and the Ahmadinejad camp might then persuade a fairly neutral candidate to run. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the Supreme Leader will allow the Ahmadinejad camp to have an easy victory. This scenario might be more controversial than the first one, as an approval from the Guardian Council would be translated as a step closer to victory for Ahmadinejad's supporters and would thus stir up the competition. In

² Rachel Ziemba, Maya Senussi, Amir Kamel, and Sara Bazoobandi, "MENA Domestic Divides Raise Risks to Growth—and Oil Prices," *Roubini Global Economic*, 5 April 2012, <http://www.roubini.com/analysis/172712.php>, accessed 15 April 2012.

either case, the defeat of a pro-Ahmadinejad candidate could lead to popular protests instigated by his supporters.

3- Ahmadinejad's unconditional victory: President Ahmadinejad is reportedly grooming one of his closest allies, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaie, for the presidential position. This move has been widely interpreted as a Putin-Medvedev-like scenario in which Ahmadinejad will officially hand the reins over to one of his supporters such that his camp would more or less run the country over the next presidential period. Ahmadinejad would then run again for election in 2017. As the Constitution does not allow three consecutive periods of presidency by one candidate, a four-year gap between the second and the third round makes this constitutionally legitimate. A state television interview with Ahmadinejad on 4 September 2012 brought attention to this possibility, as Ahmadinejad stated that his government will continue.³ The statement prompted an outcry in parliament, and some of its members took it as a sign of Ahmadinejad's agenda for the upcoming election. Should Ahmadinejad press on with grooming his preferred candidate, the possibility of postponing the election will increase.

4- Postponement of the election: Domestic and international events (such as the economic sanctions and threat of an Israeli strike) might lead the Supreme Leader to postpone the presidential election due to his concern with maintaining the Islamic revolutionary establishment.⁴ Such a move will certainly generate a public debate and invite criticism of the government. Yet, with the support of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij, it may not be too difficult to achieve. The Ahmadinejad camp, however, is likely to resist the proposal unless the deal is sweetened with an extension of Ahmadinejad's term. Regardless, if there were to be a change in the organization of the government in which an interim council would be put in charge, the current government would most likely be part of a power-sharing arrangement.

5- Elimination of the presidential position: Finally, the Supreme Leader might push harder in the months before the election for parliamentary approval of his proposal to eliminate the presidential position from the Constitution. This would not be the first time in the history of post-revolutionary Iran that a senior government role would be removed. The positions of prime minister and deputy Supreme Leader were removed in

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC0XJvdjFWQ>

⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei has frequently referred to his considerations of 'Maslihat-i Nezam' (maintaining the best interests of the Islamic Revolutionary establishment).

1989 through a constitutional amendment that removed the title of prime minister and divide his responsibilities between the president and a newly created title of first vice president. Although the proposal may not be well received by the people, with the support of the parliament, the Revolutionary Guards, and Basij, the Supreme Leader may doggedly pursue it. In this case, a close ally of Ayatollah Khamenei would technically lead the executive power. The cost of such a move would be higher than in the first three scenarios, as it could prompt strong reactions from the pro-Ahmadinejad camp as well as the people.

Conclusion

The divide between Iran's reform and conservative camps became apparent via the 2009 presidential election, and internal political disputes were further deepened through disagreements between the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad. The Supreme Leader has shown an increased interest in monopolizing political power. His proposal for the removal of the presidential position from the Constitution serves as solid evidence of his reluctance to accept a political figure with an almost equal amount of executive power as himself.

Yet the Supreme Leader has a multidimensional strategy to counter the power of Ahmadinejad and his allies. He often uses a language of moderation in order to sustain the Islamic revolutionary establishment ('Maslihat-i Nezam'), such as when he did not punish Ahmadinejad after his parliamentary grilling. Because of this strategy by the Supreme Leader, should there be an election held in June 2013, the second scenario as discussed above (a disputed victory for the Supreme Leader) would be the most probable, as Ayatollah Khamenei's overall strategy has been to avoid direct conflict with Ahmadinejad. Indeed, the Supreme Leader must have the support of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij as well as the government—that is, the president and his entourage—in order to maintain his hold on power.

Sara Bazoobandi, a former visiting research fellow at MEI, is Lecturer in Political Economy at Regent's College London and the author of Political Economy of the Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds: A Case Study of Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Routledge, 2012).