

Iran: political crisis overshadows presidential campaign

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31 May 2001

The campaign for the election of the Iranian president has begun with the vote set to take place on June 8. On May 4, just two days before the expiry of the date for applications and following months of hesitation, the current president and cleric Mohamed Khatami, who has a reputation as a “liberal reformer”, declared he was prepared to run for a second term. His victory is regarded as certain. But it is also certain that his victory will do little to achieve stabilisation of Iran and the region—in fact quite the opposite is the case.

A total of 800 people applied as candidates for Iran's highest state position in the Islamic republic. According to the official state doctrine “Velayet-e-Faqih” (Rule of the Religious Jurists), real power lies in the hands of the state's religious leader, Ali Khamenei, and organs such as the Council of Guardians. This conservative body, dominated by religious figures, has allowed just 10 candidates to stand in the election. Aside from Khatami, the remaining candidates are all regarded as more or less conservative.

The disqualification of Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a city councillor from Teheran, led to outbursts of anger. In 1979, Asgharzadeh was one of the radical students who occupied the American embassy after the overthrow of the Shah's regime. He now wears a suit and is a declared admirer of Khatami, while at the same time criticising the latter's concessions to his right-wing opponents. With support from a section of Iranian students, he had been regarded as Khatami's most serious rival.

Also notable in the list of candidates was the absence of any women, although a number of conservative women had put themselves up as candidates. The interpretation of a relevant passage in the Iranian constitution allowing women to take part in the elections proved to be controversial. On the other hand, Ali Shamkhani, a rear admiral and former officer of the Revolutionary Guard (a right-wing militia group) and current defence minister in Khatami's government, has been allowed to stand. It is 20 years since a leading military figure has stood for the office and his nomination indicates the significance of the security forces for the regime.

Ali Fallahian, the former head of the secret police who is held responsible for the deaths of over 100 opposition intellectuals and politicians in the '90s, has also been accepted as a candidate. Mohsen Rezai, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard and current secretary of the Expediency Council, surprisingly withdrew his candidacy. In past months Rezai had sharply attacked Khatami from the right and warned him against participating in the elections with “political slogans” (for the liberalisation of the system). Khatami is said to have held a conciliatory meeting with Rezai at the end of April.

The manner in which Khatami announced his candidacy was symptomatic of his political position and that of his “reform forces”. This is particularly true when one draws parallels with his first campaign four years ago. In 1997, hardly anyone predicted victory for the man, who following his downfall as minister of culture at the beginning of the '90s was then appointed head of the national library. His characteristic smile

became well known under circumstances where poker-faced grimness characterised political figures since the days of Khomeini and the overthrow of the Shah. Khatami's parliament (Majlis), however, was dominated by less friendly conservative hard-liners.

In the meantime, and following parliamentary elections a year ago, Khatami supporters have a majority of over two-thirds in the Majlis. Most of the factions and organisations of the “reformers” have announced their support for Khatami and assured him that they will not stand in his way when he seeks to put together his government. As opposed to four years ago, a clear, if not decisive victory for Khatami in the forthcoming elections seems certain. The right wing still have to officially agree on their own rival candidate.

This time around, however, the president is no longer smiling. In a short campaign speech his voice broke several times and he was even reduced to tears as he explained: “I would have preferred to have served the nation in another function.” He then went on: “Four years ago I came with clear ideas. I have had some successes, but a heavy price has been paid for our success.... Many people were hurt and many people are in a compromised position.” He once again complained about the limited power of the president and said that the realisation of further democracy “faces great obstacles ... both from within and from outside the system”. As a result, he said, in the future there would also be more “hardships and troubles”.

To put matters more bluntly, the political balance sheet of four years of Khatami rule has been disastrous. Following his initial coming to office, dozens of liberal newspapers appeared overnight. In April of last year, however, Khatami declared that these newspapers were “bases for the enemy”. Since then the conservative-dominated courts have banned more than 30 publications. At the beginning of March the international journalists organisation Reporters without Borders listed 13 imprisoned journalists and stated that Iran is “the biggest jailer of journalists in the Middle East”.

Last summer Khamenei refused at short notice to allow any discussion in parliament over changes to the press laws and, with a few grumbles, the parliament has held to the ban. Apart from a few vague phrases, Khatami has said nothing more on the issue. This has not prevented “reform” newspapers that have not been banned from calling for Khatami's re-election and presenting his political record in an uncritical light.

Khatami had also promised to solve the “serial killings” of intellectuals carried out during the rule of his predecessor Hashemi Rafsanjani. This year a few low-ranking secret service agents were convicted, but since then the file has been closed. Akbar Ganji, one of the journalists active in uncovering details of the murders—who found links between the murderers and Rafsanjani and his head of secret police, Ali Fallahian—was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for taking part in a conference in Berlin. In a surprise decision two weeks ago he was acquitted by an appeals court, but he faces further charges because of articles he has written. Rafsanjani is chairman of the influential Expediency Council. With his nomination for the presidency endorsed by the council of guardians, Rafsanjani has been

effectively given a clean bill of health—morally and legally.

Supporters and followers, even personal friends and advisors to Khatami, have been locked up, threatened and beaten up by right-wing opponents. Some, like Said Hajirian, have been the victims of assassination attempts. Some students and workers who occasionally took to the streets with pictures of Hajirian have been locked up, tortured or even killed by right-wing militias and security forces. Khatami has not lifted a finger to help them—quite the contrary. During mass protests in July 1999, July 2000 and February of this year—which were savagely repressed—he sided quite openly with the state and accused the demonstrators of being “provocateurs” or “traitors to Islam”. He used similar phrases to describe the student organisation Office to Strengthen Unity, which despite these attacks is still calling for a vote for Khatami in the upcoming elections.

It now appears that both a section of students and the population at large are becoming disappointed with Khatami. Even in the loyal and moderate reformist student organisation Office to Strengthen Unity, following a vigorous debate there was only a narrow majority in favour of supporting Khatami. Other student organisations have refused to support Khatami and have made clear their intention to boycott the elections.

The general mood is also made clear by reports from Iran in the western media, which generally favours Khatami. Interviews carried out by Agence France Presse in Teheran on the day Khatami announced his candidacy demonstrated little enthusiasm: “Abdol-Reza Shahla, a taxi driver, stated, ‘Well, who else is there to vote for?’ and ‘If there are any other candidates, I don’t know anything about them.’ Solmoz, a nursing student, said: ‘Four years ago I voted for Khatami, his words have found a way into the hearts of the people,’ she said. ‘I know the students will vote for him, but I won’t—he has no power.’”

The *Washington Post* reported at the beginning of the election campaign, on May 19: “In interviews, many youths said that while they support the reform movement, they did not plan to vote in next month’s election because, with conservatives vetoing most of the elected government’s liberalization efforts, it was pointless. If that sentiment is widespread, it could be bad news both for Khatami, who wants a large turnout to renew his mandate for change, and for the conservatives, who fear that a low turnout could threaten the legitimacy of the Islamic regime.”

In an analysis of the election by the British BBC on May 4, reporter Tarik Kafala referred to the collaboration between Khatami and Khamenei and warned: “Whatever their differences, Mr. Khatami and Mr. Khamenei, are both dedicated to protecting Iran’s Islamic republic.

“The two men may have different views on the direction that Iran should take, but in many ways they need each other to achieve their goals.

“Both Mr. Khamenei and Mr. Khatami are concerned by the radicalisation on both ends of the spectrum, and the potential for political violence which is often close to the surface in Iran.

“Because of his 1997 election victory, and his continuing popularity, Mr. Khatami is the Iranian politician with the strongest claim to having a popular mandate.

“There are clear signs that Mr. Khamenei understands this, and is unwilling to allow Mr. Khatami, a popular elected leader, to be undermined too far.

“The danger is that Iranians who feel their democratically expressed will is being treated with contempt will in turn start treating the institutions and authority of the state with contempt.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that Khatami recently called for “massive participation in the vote”. Whether this will take place is questionable. According to press reports the election has begun slowly and quietly. The “reformers” seek a broad mobilisation and at the same time want to avoid a confrontation with the hard-liners. But Khatami’s economic and social programme is hostile to the interests of the broad masses. His five-year

plan envisages an opening up of Iran to international capital, as well as deregulation and privatisation. For the first time, private banks have begun to emerge. And just a short time ago the Iranian parliament passed a law facilitating foreign investment in the country. Such measures can only lead to increased unemployment and poverty for the Iranian people.

The opening up of the economy also threatens the privileges of the conservative bazaar merchants and clergy who control a vast business empire in the form of institutions, and thereby influence a substantial segment of the national economy. Up until now it was possible for both sides to come to a compromise. This was linked, however, to the high price of oil and the relatively favourable position of the Iranian economy.

For the “reformers”, political liberalisation and democratic measures are ultimately a means of strengthening the Islamic Republic. As a consequence, these forces are unable and unwilling to seriously defend the democratic rights under attack by the government. This is the source of the apparent strength of the conservative hard-liners, who in fact represent a small minority in Iran, but are able to pressure the opposition and terrorise the population as they see fit.

Just a few days after the announcement of Khatami’s candidacy, another newspaper was banned and 400 Internet cafes in Teheran were closed without warning.

Ali Afshari, a leader of the Office to Strengthen Unity, appeared on state-owned television last week with a confession which he had been clearly pressed to make. He confessed to being part of a conspiracy aimed at undermining the regime and in this context to have established relations with the so-called Liberation Movement.

The Liberation Movement itself has been the victim of repression in recent months. Over 60 of its members, including its leader, were arrested and accused of espionage, subversive activities and other crimes. The actions of the regime against this organisation are an indication of extreme fear and nervousness. The Liberation Movement was formed in 1953, following the putsch by the Shah and his army (stage-managed by the CIA) against the elected government led by the bourgeois nationalist Mohamed Mossadeg and his party, the National Front. The putsch was successful because instead of appealing to the people Mossadeg turned to sections of the army and the Iranian Stalinists, the Tudeh party. The Stalinists, in turn, did not seek to mobilise the working class against the coup d’état independently from Mossadeg. Most of the Islamic clergy supported the Shah.

This is why Mehdi Bazargan, a collaborator of Mossadeg, came to the conclusion that in future the nationalists should work together with the clergy. He founded the Liberation Movement on this perspective. In 1979 Bazargan was able to push through his line among the bourgeoisie nationalists and became for a short time the first head of government under the mullahs after the overthrow of the Shah. The Liberation Movement was tolerated by the Islamic regime as a symbol of reconciliation between Islamic fundamentalism and bourgeois nationalism. By suddenly suppressing it, the regime has made it clear that it will not give up power peacefully.

The military operations against the Peoples Mujahedin, which operate from Iraq, have the same significance. According to the Peoples Mujahedin and the Iraqi government, on April 18 Iran fired more than 50 Scud missiles at Iraqi territory, killing and wounding several Iraqi civilians. Since the war between these two states ended in 1988 there has been no comparable military provocation.

In Afghanistan this month 10 people were killed when a bomb exploded in a mosque. Among the dead was an Iranian religious dissident and cleric, who belonged to the Islamic minority of Sunnites. The Taliban accused Iran of being responsible for the attack. Various reports in the media claimed that Iran had increased its support for the Northern Alliance, who are opposing the Taliban in the Afghani civil war.

In the meantime, Iran has improved its relations with the various

conservative, pro-western regimes and sheikhdoms in the Gulf region. It has signed a security treaty with Saudi Arabia to “fight crime and terrorism”. Kuwait has officially apologised for supporting Iraq during the war in the '80s and even the United Arab Emirates, with whom Iran is bitterly squabbling over the sovereignty of several islands, has wished Khatami success in his campaign. Egypt has also shown clear interest in improving political relations with Iran.

The background to these moves is the Palestinian *intifada* and the growing tensions in the Middle East, as a consequence of the offensive by Israel. This is destabilising the pro-western Arab regimes and strengthening the Islamic groups, many of whom collaborate with Iran. The Iranian regime, especially the hard-liners, have always used radical terminology, taking a pose against Israel. They are attempting to utilise the current situation to divert the Iranian population from the repression at home while at the same time strengthening its regional influence.

This is why Iran remains under heavy pressure from the US. Initially it was expected that the new Bush administration, having close ties to the oil industry, would lift the economic sanctions imposed on Iran. So far the European and Asian companies, which are extensively involved in Iran, are those who have benefited from the existing policy of sanctions. American companies—which, according to the *Financial Times*, comprise more than 600 and are amalgamated in the umbrella organisation “USA Engage”—are conducting intensive lobbying to lift the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act. The issue of possibly extending sanctions is currently being debated in the US Congress and will be decided in August.

While within the Congress and the CIA strong resistance against lifting the economic sanctions remains, the Bush administration has so far kept a low profile on the matter. One of the preconditions Washington demands from Teheran before lifting the sanctions is that Iran cease supporting “terrorism”. Till now Iran has responded by referring to the American support for Israeli state terrorism.

The case of Iraq has been handled differently from that of Israel. The US has apparently—without success—attempted to gain active Iranian support for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the pro-American umbrella organisation, the Iraqi National Congress (INC). The majority of the Iraqi population are Shiite Moslems. The pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Iranian Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is the most important Shiite opposition organisation and has allegedly carried out numerous assassinations against the regime. According to Arab and American sources, the leadership of this organisation has already made clear that it is interested in collaboration, but this line faces strong opposition within the SCIRI itself.

On April 23, the American broadcasting station Radio Free Europe reported: “Another intermediary in Washington's contacts with the SCIRI is Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmad Chalabi. Chalabi's March visit to Tehran reportedly failed to yield the desired results—permission to open an INC office in Tehran and establishment of a ‘safe pocket’ for the opposition in southern Iraq. INC spokesman Sharif Ali Bin Al-Hussein told Radio Free Iraq recently that the discussions are continuing.”



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