

Tense Iranian election goes into second round

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23 June 2005

The results of the June 17 Iranian presidential elections surprised many commentators and have served to intensify the country's political crisis. Former president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was regarded as favorite to win the election, failed to obtain an absolute majority. For the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the election of the president requires a second round of voting.

According to current election estimates, Rafsanjani, the country's richest and most influential politician, who as president in 1989-91 implemented a program of free-market measures and privatization of many state enterprises, received just 20.8 percent of the vote. In second place, with nearly the same total (19.3 percent), was the largely unknown mayor of Teheran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—regarded as an outsider by the media.

Ahmadinejad is described as an ultra-conservative Islamist, who as mayor of the Iranian capital sought to curb cultural and social liberties in Teheran. He draws his political support mainly from radical militias and influential clerics. With a mixture of religious fanaticism and social demagoguery, he was able to win electoral support from the most impoverished and oppressed layers of society.

The main losers in the election are the so-called “reformers” led by incumbent President Mohammad Khatami, who was constitutionally barred from standing for re-election. The main reform candidate, Mustafa Moin, trailed in fifth place. At least three other conservative candidates collected more votes.

Following a decision by the conservative Council of Guardians, Moin was initially denied the right to stand and then could only take part in the election because of the personal intervention of supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This makes clear the extent to which the reformers are in the hand of the religious hard liners.

Altogether the five prominent conservative candidates—which include Mehdi Karrubi, who for a time was parliamentary president under Khatami and an advisor to Khamenei—received over 20 million votes. This is four times the total won by the two reform candidates, who together picked up just five million votes.

According to government data, the election turnout was 62.7 percent—12 percent higher than turnout for the parliamentary elections in February of last year. Initial election analyses

indicate that a section of former supporters of the reformers stayed at home—as they had done in previous elections. Others, in particular from better-off layers of the middle class, who formerly supported Khatami, voted for moderate conservative candidates—above all Rafsanjani. Mahmud Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, was able to win support from fresh layers of the electorate.

The Teheran mayor was evidently able to mobilize the most deprived urban social layers. In the town of Isfahan, with its millions of inhabitants, he even obtained an absolute majority. In addition he was able to win over the regime's paramilitary and extremist forces and pose as the advocate of the little man. Writing in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* Karl Grobe disputes his right to this appellation and continues: “The actual significance of the election lies in this mobilization and the decline as a political force of a middle class which poses as modern and politically and intellectually enlightened.”

It would be going too far to write off the “middle class as a political force” or associate it in its entirety with the party of the reformers, but it is clear that the election marks the final political bankruptcy of Khatami and his supporters. This was also clear from their own reaction to the election result. While prominent representatives of the reform camp declared that the support for Mahmud Ahmadinejad entailed the danger of a “militarization of society” and “the outlines of a budding fascism,” they called in the same breath for support for Rafsanjani in the second round ballot.

Typically, the journalist and human rights activist Emad Baghi, regarded as one of the leaders of the reform movement, declared on Sunday evening: “I call upon all forces in Iran for reform and renewal to vote for Rafsanjani.” Compared with Ahmadinejad, Baghi continued, the pistachio millionaire Rafsanjani (who before the election reformers described as the gravedigger of reforms) is the “lesser evil.”

One of the most influential reform parties, the Islamic Participation Front, also made a declaration which amounted to expressing solidarity with Rafsanjani. The declaration spoke of “two fronts” opposing one another, whereby one tries “with the participation of a military party to win the elections at all costs” while the other is “very worried about this extremism.” On Monday, the largest student grouping in the country withdrew its call to boycott the election and announced it would be establishing teams across the country to campaign for

Rafsanjani.

The liberal press—in particular the newspaper *Sharg*—has put forward similar arguments. It called for the reform camp to unite behind Rafsanjani in order to stop the hard-liner Ahmadinejad. The Teheran newspaper *Aftab* wrote: “Now the issue is to mobilize all forces for next Friday to prevent a disaster.”

Rafsanjani, however, is no alternative to Ahmadinejad. He maintains the closest relations with the most right-wing circles of the clergy and implemented severe attacks on the population during his period in power. In 1995, when his economic measures led to a doubling of prices, as head of government he was responsible for ordering military attack helicopters to intervene against peaceful demonstrators protesting the inflation. At the time, foreign observers reported more 100 deaths.

In reality, the growth in right-wing forces is a direct result of the policy of the reformers. Eight years ago, following widespread discontent with the reactionary regime of the mullahs, Khatami was swept to power with a large majority, and many hoped for social improvement and democratic reform. But his government was never prepared to challenge the conservative ruling powers in the Council of Guardians or defend democratic rights.

The religious hard-liners, who at that time had only limited popular support but controlled important sections of the economy, the state apparatus and above all the judiciary and national television, systematically built up their mechanisms for repression. More than a dozen newspapers were banned, political opponents thrown in prison, strikes and protest demonstrations terrorized by paramilitary militias and anti-Semitic tendencies encouraged through deliberate show trials of Jews.

Time and time again, Khatami and his parliamentary group of reformers backed down in face of this pressure and saw their main task as calling for “peace and order” as social conditions deteriorated and unemployment rose. Initial hopes for improvement were systematically dispelled and the most oppressed layers of society driven to despair—a development which has been exploited by Islamist fanatics.

The war in the neighboring country of Iraq and constant threats by the Bush administration to intervene militarily against Iran have also served to intensify the political crisis in Teheran. While broad layers of the population became increasingly hostile to the war and the brutal occupation of Iraq and the whole Gulf region, the Khatami government signaled its willingness to hold talks and co-operate. This only helped to accelerate the loss of confidence in the government.

On the evening prior to the election, US President Bush increased pressure on the government in Teheran, accusing it of blocking democratic processes. “Today, Iran is ruled by men who suppress liberty at home and spread terror across the world,” Bush declared in Washington. “Power is in the hands

of an unelected few who have retained power through an electoral process that ignores the basic requirements of democracy,” he continued. The presidential election, he said, was “sadly consistent with this oppressive record,” citing the fact that 1,000 would-be candidates were denied a spot on the ballot. Concluding his remarks Bush called indirectly for an election boycott.

This intervention had unanticipated consequences. Many Iranians took part in the election precisely to express their rejection of the US government and its policies. In April of this year, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher had already announced that the US government was freeing up several millions dollars in order to support Iranian activists and non-government organizations (NGOs) campaigning for the democratization of Iran. A web site was also set up for the same purpose. The response, however, has been very limited.

Two days after the election, US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice dismissed its significance, despite the high election turnout of 62.7 percent. In an interview with ABC television news, Rice again cited the exclusion of candidates and declared, “I just don’t see the Iranian elections as being a serious attempt to move Iran closer to a democratic future.” Ironically she made her comments just prior to setting off for Cairo, where she praised the stability of the government of President Hosni Mubarak, whose own recent electoral reforms were accompanied by violent protests and appeals for a boycott by the Egyptian opposition.

While the US government is continuing to look for ways to implement “regime change à la Baghdad” in Teheran, social and political tensions are continuing to increase. Half of the Iranian electorate is under 25 years of age. Many unemployed young people are eager to attend the universities and want nothing to do with either the “reformers” or the Islamist fanatics.



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