

Iranians voting in presidential poll

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12 June 2009

Iranian voters go to the polls today in the first round of the presidential election after a boisterous campaign that has involved hundreds of thousands in rallies and street demonstrations for and against incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

All four candidates—Ahmadinejad, former commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) Mohsen Rezaei, ex-prime minister Mirhossein Mousavi and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi—have longstanding ties to the Iranian political establishment and were vetted by the unelected Guardian Council.

Moreover, there is a broad consensus among the candidates in favour of improving relations with the US as a means of ending the country's diplomatic and economic isolation. Confronted with a dramatic fall in oil prices from last year and a deepening global recession, the economy is slowing and in desperate need of investment. All the candidates understand that the brunt of the crisis has to be imposed on working people. [See: "Iranian presidential election: candidates debate strategic shift"]

Nevertheless, sharp tactical differences have emerged during the campaign over Ahmadinejad's policies, reflecting divisions within the political establishment itself. Over the past week, Mousavi has criticised Ahmadinejad's anti-US posturing and his appeals to anti-Semitic sentiment by questioning the Nazi Holocaust.

During a live TV debate last week, Mousavi warned that Ahmadinejad was moving Iran toward "dictatorship" and based his foreign policy on "adventurism, illusionism, exhibitionism, extremism and superficiality". He continued: "For the past four years you kept saying that the United States is collapsing. You said Israel is collapsing. France is collapsing. Your foreign policy has been based on such illusionary perceptions."

Mousavi speaks for sections of the Iranian ruling elite who believe that an opportunity exists with the Obama administration to ease tensions with the US, and regard Ahmadinejad's confrontational style as a barrier. Mousavi, who has emerged as the leading challenger, has the backing not only of the reformers, but also layers of the conservatives.

Ex-president Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who held office between 1997 and 2005 and pursued a free-market policy of opening Iran up to European and Asian investors, withdrew from the election and endorsed Mousavi at a rally in Tehran last month.

Mousavi also has been supported by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a conservative who heads the powerful Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts, which oversees the office of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Ahmadinejad scored an upset win over Rafsanjani in the second round of the 2005 presidential election by portraying himself as a man of the people fighting a corrupt establishment that was betraying the principles of the 1979 Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah. Rafsanjani, as well as being a powerful political figure, is one of Iran's wealthiest men and notorious for his corruption. Ahmadinejad was also able to capitalise on the deepening poverty and unemployment caused by Khatami's pro-market policies.

During last week's debate, Ahmadinejad lashed out at Rafsanjani and his sons, accusing them of corruption and financing Mousavi's campaign. "These three were together from the beginning, Mousavi, Khatami and Hashemi. They cooperated against me," he declared. Four years on, however, Ahmadinejad's demagoguery has less impact, as he is well known for handing out lucrative construction contracts to the Revolutionary Guard Corp with which he has close ties.

In an open letter this week calling on supreme leader Khamenei to rein in Ahmadinejad, Rafsanjani lashed out at the president's "lies and distortions of the truth, which were against religion, law, ethnics and fairness and were aimed at the achievements of our Islamic system". The letter alluded to the danger of "volcanoes" of anger erupting, including over the alleged disappearance of \$US1 billion in oil revenues owed by the government to the treasury. A further open letter from 50 clerics from Qom, an important religious centre, criticised Ahmadinejad along similar lines.

Rafsanjani's son Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani is in charge of a sophisticated and expensive election operation based at the Islamic Azad University, founded by his father, aimed at helping Mousavi over the line. The *Los Angeles Times* reported last week that, according to several political insiders, the elder Rafsanjani brokered a deal with Khamenei several months ago to encourage Khatami to pull out of the election, in return for the supreme leader not throwing his support behind Ahmadinejad.

Mousavi is running a well-oiled campaign through the Internet and mobile phones, designed to mobilise the urban middle classes who are deeply hostile to the anti-democratic strictures of the

Iranian regime. Festooned in green—the campaign colour—tens of thousands of supporters this week stretched out in a human chain running the length of Valiasr, a major 30-kilometre road through Tehran.

The *Los Angeles Times* noted other signs indicating that sections of the conservative establishment were quietly assisting Mousavi's campaign. In March, the country's powerful parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, foiled a proposal by Ahmadinejad to cut price subsidies on water, petrol, gas and electricity—a move that would have allowed the president more money to spend on election pork barrelling.

Broad layers of the country's political and business establishment have become increasingly hostile to Ahmadinejad's populist economic policies of keeping interest rates low and "squandering" the country's oil wealth on handouts, particularly in rural areas. The so-called reformers Mousavi and Karroubi, as well as the conservative Rezaei, have attacked Ahmadinejad for economic mismanagement.

In last week's debate, Ahmadinejad was clearly on the back foot as he tried to dress up his economic record. Attacking the statistics that Ahmadinejad presented, Karroubi exclaimed: "Do you think I came from the desert, and that I don't know anything about figures?" The Central Bank reported inflation of 23.6 percent this week, not 14 percent as claimed by Ahmadinejad. Rising prices are a source of widespread popular anger that sections of the ruling elite are seeking to exploit to push through their own pro-market agenda. Karroubi is advocating a dramatic speeding up of the privatisation of state-run monopolies.

The outcome of the election is far from clear. If no candidate receives over 50 percent in the poll today, a second round run-off between the two leading contenders will take place on June 19.

Mousavi is drawing his support from sections of the urban middle class and from young people. State-run Press TV reported that Mousavi led Ahmadinejad in a poll last month in 10 major cities by 38 to 34 percent. Around 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30 and many students and youth, especially in cities, are backing Mousavi. This support, however, is far more an expression of hostility to Ahmadinejad and the regime, than positive endorsement for Mousavi, who even his promoters acknowledge is a rather drab public figure.

The US and international media have made no secret of their bias toward Mousavi and his slick campaign promising reform. The presence of his wife Zahra Rahnavard, an academic, on the election platform and her challenges to Ahmadinejad have been promoted as a sign that Mousavi will ease the regime's anti-democratic restrictions on women and the population more broadly. While he may make cosmetic changes, Mousavi's agenda is to patch up relations with the US and to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people—policies that will provoke opposition, which, as in the past, will be met by state repression.

Ahmadinejad's supporters are invariably painted in the international media as religious zealots and the ignorant poor. The president certainly draws support from the most conservative layers of the Iranian political establishment, especially the military, the Revolutionary Guard and associated militias. His populist rhetoric and limited financial handouts are also aimed at sections of the urban and rural poor who have been hard hit by the economic crisis and among whom there is a deep distrust of the regime and the wealthy elite, personified in the billionaire Rafsanjani.

The election campaign has revealed a far deeper alienation with the entire political establishment. Three decades after the Iranian revolution, a theocratic state ruling on behalf of the country's wealthy elites presides over a deepening social gulf between rich and poor by enforcing conservative social mores and suppressing any independent opposition. It regards even the limited popular involvement in rallies and demonstrations during the election campaign with deep suspicion.

In an ominous sign, the political chief of the Revolutionary Guard, General Yadollah Javani, warned this week that there would be no colour revolutions in Iran—referring to the US-backed political movements in countries like Lebanon and the Ukraine. "There are many indications that some extremist [reformist] groups, have designed a colourful revolution ... using a specific colour for the first time in an election.... Any movement for a velvet revolution in Iran will be nipped in the bud."

While the warning was directed against Mousavi's "green" campaigners, the threat is aimed more broadly against any movement against the regime. There is no doubt that in the event of a social upheaval of the working class all sections of the ruling elite—conservatives and reformers alike—would quickly come together to demand a ruthless crackdown.



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