

Iranian election crisis continues amid growing US threats

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be sworn in today for his second four-year term as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, under conditions in which a rift within the country's ruling elite is being aggravated by US economic and military threats.

The differences in Iranian ruling circles were symbolically displayed at Monday's ceremony for the country's Supreme Leader Ayotallah Ali Khamenei to formally endorse Ahmadinejad as the victor in the June 12 presidential election.

In an unprecedented act, some of the country's most powerful figures boycotted the event. Among them were former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami; defeated presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubri; and Hassan Khomeini, the grandson and most prominent heir of the regime's founder, Ayotallah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Dozens of less prominent but still influential clerics, politicians and state functionaries also indicated their rejection of Ahmadinejad's legitimacy by refusing to attend.

Following the June 12 ballot, the supporters of Mousavi, who advocated a rapprochement with the US and other major powers and far-reaching free market economic restructuring, organised weeks of protests. They alleged that the result was rigged and demanded new elections.

Monday's boycott made clear that the opposition campaign will continue in defiance of appeals and threats by Ayotallah Khamenei and his supporters. The previous day some 100 oppositionists who were arrested during the protests—including former vice president Muhammad Ali Abtahi—were brought before a televised trial to “confess” and declare their loyalty to

the Islamic state.

Despite opposition accusations, there is no credible evidence of massive electoral fraud. Ahmadinejad won over 60 percent of the votes, particularly among the working class and rural poor. Already enduring high unemployment and rampant inflation, millions of Iranians feared that Mousavi's demands for major cuts to social spending would only worsen their living standards. They voted for Ahmadinejad as a “lesser evil”. Workers were noticeably absent in the subsequent post-election protests.

Mousavi's supporters are drawn overwhelmingly from better-off social layers who hope to benefit from free market policies, and sections of youth who naively trust Mousavi's vague promises of democratic reforms. Mousavi has been backed by the Rafsanjani family, which owns a number of corporations and vast land-holdings, and other sections of Iranian business that want to end their isolation from international markets, loans and investment.

The US and its allies have sought to exploit the political crisis to pressure the Iranian regime into implementing the main features of Mousavi's foreign and domestic agenda. The desired outcome is greater access to Iran's rich reserves of oil and natural gas, domestic market and sizeable educated and low-cost labour force, as well as assistance in consolidating the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The backing of the imperialist powers is a significant factor encouraging the ongoing agitation inside Iran. Oppositional groups called for protests against today's swearing-in ceremony at the main markets in Tehran and other cities. Summing up the opposition's agenda, defeated candidate Mahdi Karroubri told a Spanish newspaper yesterday: “We do not consider this government to be legitimate. We are going to continue

protesting. We are never going to cooperate with this government. We don't want to harm it but we are going to criticise its actions. We are not going to help it in any way."

US threats against the regime are being stepped up. On Monday, the *New York Times* reported that the Obama administration is seeking to line up the Democratic Party-controlled Congress and its main allies internationally to support cutting off Iran's access to imported refined petroleum products if it continues to refuse to end its nuclear program.

This highly provocative move threatens to spark a major confrontation with Iran. While Iran is a major oil producer, it currently imports some 40 percent of its domestic demand for petrol and gasoline due to a lack of refining capacity. Without the imports, the country would be brought to its knees.

The *Times* referred again to unconfirmed claims that the White House has struck an agreement with the Israeli government for it to wait until after UN Security Council meetings in September before launching a unilateral air attack against Iran's nuclear facilities.

The reported aim of the delay is to provide Washington time to gain UN endorsement for harsher economic sanctions that could force the regime into a backdown that would benefit the Iranian opposition. By contrast, any Israeli assault would galvanise the country's population behind Khamenei's and Ahmadinejad's populist defiance of the major powers.

In the lead-up to the UN session, in a manner reminiscent of the Iraq "weapons of mass destruction" hysteria, unnamed "western intelligence sources" leaked to the British-based *Times* this month unsubstantiated claims that Iran has the necessary capacity to assemble nuclear weapons within 12 months.

The UN Security Council, however, is unlikely to support harsher sanctions. Both the Chinese and Russian governments, conscious that the nuclear issue is simply a stalking horse for boosting US influence in Iran, could use their veto to block any resolution.

Moreover, sanctions, whether UN-endorsed or unilaterally applied by the US and the European powers, would have to be enforced. Iran has repeatedly threatened to respond to such blatant aggression by closing the Straits of Hormuz, through which tankers take vast quantities of Persian Gulf oil production to

Asia and other markets.

While the Obama administration has offered to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear programs, the political crisis in Tehran makes talks less likely. US efforts to impose crippling sanctions on Iran or an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities could plunge the Middle East into another devastating war.



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