

# Iran's Presidential Election: The Failure of Managed Functionalism

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## ABSTRACT

Iran's elections have historically managed factional conflict without altering the institutional distribution of power. Against this political background, the June 2009 elections stand out as a unique event. Elections that once served to manage conflict have now become a destabilizing factor. While the regime appears to have forcefully silenced the widespread post-election protests, the 2009 uprising shows the new limits of elections in managing factional conflict, which spread out to include Iran's people. The regime grossly miscalculated not just the effects of massive public participation in the 2009 elections, but also the buildup of widespread grievances among a substantial section of Iran's citizens. The protests have aggravated the ruling elite's fear of a "velvet revolution" instigated by the West. Consequently, post-election negotiations between Iran and the Western powers regarding Iran's nuclear program are likely to meet significant obstacles, since recent events have further diminished confidence between Iran and its antagonists.

Elections have served to perpetuate the factional pluralism inherent in the Islamic Republic since its inception. While elections are not agents of democratization or de-democratization by themselves in the Islamic Republic, they do significantly affect the balance of power among competing factions operating within the system. Iran's elections provide an institutional mechanism that facilitates the rise and demise of factions and the formation and dissolution of strategic alliances; they manage factional conflict, and introduce an element of political uncertainty that is absent in many Middle Eastern states. Hence, electoral competition in Iran has traditionally prevented permanent elite defections that could destabilize the regime by promising that today's losers could be tomorrow's winners. At the same time, the winners in Iran's popularly elected institutions remain subordinated to figures in the unelected institutions.

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and presidential decrees), the Pasdaran (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), the judiciary, and a variety of other institutions.<sup>1</sup>

In this political context, the events during and after the 2009 elections have been unique and are poised to have lasting implications. For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, mass grievances were translated into massive public demonstrations that questioned the legitimacy of the key institutions of the Iranian regime. While the regime appears to have contained these demonstrations, the 2009 uprising has shown the limits of elections in managing factional conflict, which spread out to include Iran's people.

### **The Campaign**

President Mahmood Ahmedinejad was the frontrunner in the 2009 elections. Ex-president Mohammad Khatami had initially announced his candidacy but later withdrew in favor of Mir Hossein Mousavi, who had served as Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989. During his tenure, Mousavi had many differences with Ali Khamanei, the current *faqih*, who was then president of Iran. After 1989 Mousavi avoided politics and refused to run for office in the 1997 and 2005 presidential elections. Mousavi decided to reenter active politics in 2009 primarily because of his discontent with the Ahmedinejad government. He argued that Ahmedinejad had abandoned the principles of the Islamic Revolution and was governing with dictatorial methods. Mousavi quickly mobilized the support of Khatami and major reformist organizations including the Islamic Iran Participation Front (Jebhe-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami, IIPF), and emerged as serious contender to challenge Ahmedinejad. After the official campaigning period started on May 22, Mousavi galvanized a substantial segment of the Iranian population who felt excluded and marginalized under Ahmedinejad's presidency. Departing from their tactics in the 2005 presidential elections, the reformist groups did not call for a boycott, and energetically participated in the campaign. In addition to Ahmedinejad and Mousavi, ex-Speaker of the Parliament Mehdi Karroubi and ex-

Commander of the Pasdaran Mohsen Rezai ran in the elections after the GC approved their candidacy.

Unlike the previous elections, campaigning was intense in 2009 and drew enormous voter interest. The campaigning was mostly peaceful, with the exception of a May 28 bomb attack that killed several dozens in a Shiite mosque in Zahedan, the capital of the Sistan and Baluchestan province bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ahmedinejad and Mousavi rallies attracted huge crowds. In the evenings, thousands of Ahmedinejad and Mousavi supporters taunted each other in many cities. Cultural and social divisions were visible in these instances. In an interesting exchange in Tehran several days before the elections, when a pedestrian heard Mousavi supporters condescendingly describing Ahmedinejad supporters as peasants, he replied by saying, "I am proud to be a peasant and supporter of the President."

Ahmedinejad enjoyed substantial support, thanks to his populist redistributive policies that included direct cash rewards. He was backed by the key institutions of the regime including the Pasdaran, the GC, and various institutions linked to the office of *faqih*. The Mousavi camp relied heavily on the Internet and mobile phones to mobilize public support, given its very limited influence over the traditional media sources. It chose green as its campaign color in a highly symbolic reference to Mousavi's claim of being a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad and to legitimize his platforms as being Islamic. Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard was very visible during the campaign; she directly appealed to women voters and made the issue of women's rights central to Mousavi's campaign. Mousavi's core supporters were the educated, urban, middle-class and most resourceful segments of Iranian society, who shared a deep hostility towards the Ahmedinejad government. Mousavi was transformed into the leader of an anti-Ahmedinejad coalition that included many groups with diverse grievances and demands. Interestingly, this group included many citizens who had voted for Ahmedinejad in 2005 when he ran against Hashemi Rafsanjani, ex-President and current Chairman of the Assembly of Experts (Majles-e Khobregan)<sup>2</sup>, and the Expediency Council (Majma-ye Tashkhis-e Maslehat). Mousavi also drew support from Iranians with diverse socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. He gained the backing of many Azeri-Turks primarily because he shares the same ethnicity. Mousavi supporters called Ahmedinejad a liar (*dorough gou*) for his rosy depiction of prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions. In what now stands as a portent of what would come, Mousavi supporters repeatedly shouted, "if there is any cheating, apocalypse will happen in Iran." Meanwhile, public enthusiasm generated by the



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Mousavi campaign unnerved many of Ahmedinejad's influential backers, who accused Mousavi of destabilizing the regime and helping the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

For the first time in its history, Iranian state television staged one-on-one debates among presidential candidates. Although the state-controlled media was heavily biased towards the President, these debates significantly increased public interest in the elections and brought sensitive issues into the limelight. The opposition candidates sharply criticized Ahmedinejad for his bombastic foreign policy style and economic mismanagement. While all the candidates declared that nuclear energy was Iran's national right and objected to foreign interference, Mousavi and Karroubi argued that Ahmedinejad's foreign policy had actually harmed Iran's national interests and isolated the country in the international arena. The opposition candidates also accused Ahmedinejad of not being able to rein in inflation, and of wastefully allocating windfall oil revenues. In response, Ahmedinejad claimed that his nuclear policy was successful, noting that foreign powers were now seeking talks with Iran, and he defended his questioning of the Holocaust. He also linked Mousavi with Rafsanjani, and accused the latter

and his family of engaging in financially corrupt practices. This was a strategic move on the part of Ahmedinejad who had easily defeated Rafsanjani in 2005 by portraying him as being out of touch with ordinary Iranians and their problems. Rafsanjani responded by sending a letter to Khamenei asking for his intervention. These developments signified a deep rift within the ruling elite and increased the stakes in the elections.

### **The Question of Electoral Fraud**

State television started to show the electoral results at midnight on Friday, June 12. They showed Ahmedinejad leading with a comfortable margin. The Ministry of the Interior (MOI, *Vezerat-e Keshvar*) declared that Ahmedinejad received about 24,600,000 of approximately 39,400,000 valid votes on Saturday. Since Ahmedinejad had gathered more than 50 percent of the votes, there was no need for a second round. Mousavi only won around 13,300,000 votes; Rezai and Karroubi less than 1 million votes each. As happened in the 2005 elections, the losing candidates cried foul play. Mousavi was defiant, claiming that there had been massive fraud and refusing to recognize the legitimacy of an Ahmedinejad government.

In the absence of an independent organization overseeing the electoral process, it is not possible to decide on the extent of fraud in the elections. What is most puzzling is not the fact that Ahmedinejad was declared the winner, but the ways in which the elections were conducted and the results were announced, which undermined public trust in the electoral system. First of all, the number of eligible voters announced by the MOI is problematic. According to the MOI, 46.2 million Iranians were eligible to vote in the 2009 elections. This figure is puzzling because the MOI had declared that there were 47,733,051 eligible voters in the March 2008 parliamentary elections. Given Iran's annual population growth rate of 1.3 percent, a decrease in the number of eligible voters is implausible. Moreover, the GC had announced that 43.6 million Iranians were eligible to vote in the 2008 parliamentary elections. Even if one accepts their number as accurate, the difference between the number of eligible voters in 2008 and 2009 is still inexplicable. An increase of 2,600,000 voters in fifteen months is simply impossible given the annual population growth rate. Furthermore, the MOI never announced the number of eligible voters at the province and district level in the 2009 elections. Thus, the turnout rate of 85 percent should be taken with a grain of salt.

Second, there were widespread irregularities on Election Day. The SMS network, which was crucial for the reformist candidates to coordinate their activi-

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ties, was turned off and remained dysfunctional for almost three weeks. Plainclothes agents from the Ministry of Intelligence (Vezerat-e Ettelaat) stormed the offices of the Mousavi campaign in Tehran, observers from his campaign was expelled from polling stations, and insufficient precautions were taken to prevent ballot stuffing and vote selling.

Finally, the counting stage was nontransparent and controlled by the GC and MOI, which are partisan institutions. Hence, it would not have been at all difficult to artificially increase or decrease the number of votes received by the candidates. In fact, the Mousavi camp alleged that millions of extra ballots were printed and included in the counting. Electoral results from many provinces and districts defy common sense.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Mousavi and Karroubi together received as many votes in 2009 as four “reformist” candidates, Mehralizadeh, Moin, Karroubi, and Rafsanjani combined received in 2005 in the province of East Azerbaijan despite a more than 50 percent increase in the number of people who voted. These results look very curious. They clearly do not reflect the massive public support shown for Mousavi, a native son of the province, in the streets of Tabriz during the days before the election. At the same time, a direct comparison between the 2005 and 2009 elections may be misleading because a parliamentary bill approved by the GC increased the voting age from 15 to 18 in January 2007. Hence, there is a significant change in the composition of eligible voters between the two elections.

In summary, these issues raise red flags regarding the credibility of the electoral results. The fact that the Iranian regime refused to establish an independent commission to investigate the allegations of fraud, despite repeated calls from a variety of Iranian political actors, continues to cast a huge shadow over the fairness of the competition.

## **The Uprising**

While Ahmedinejad supporters gathered and began to celebrate the announcement of the electoral results, others poured onto the streets and demanded their annulment. People had diverse motivations to join the demonstrations, ranging from economic grievances to opposition to the Islamic Republic. At the same time, for most of the protestors, four more years under Ahmedinejad government was simply intolerable. They complained about rising inflation, the deteriorating human rights situation, the contraction of liberties, increasing pressures on civil so-

ciety activism, and Iran's isolation in the international arena due to Ahmedinejad's policies. Especially for upper and middle class citizens, demonstrations were the only way to express their disenfranchisement, lack of meaningful representation, and alienation from the political system. When the regime mobilized its forces to crush the demonstrations, protestors found themselves confronted not only by the Ahmedinejad government, but also by the very embodiment of the Islamic Republic, the *faqih*.

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Demonstrations quickly grew and clashes between protesters and security forces including Basij, plain-clothes paramilitary forces, took place in many cities on Saturday. The state-controlled media portrayed the protestors as "hooligans and rioters" who were attacking public property, in an effort to discourage more people from participating in the demonstrations and to legitimize the crackdown that involved mass arrests of reformist figures and the storming of several universities. Nonetheless, the demonstrations did not abate in the following days. Mousavi himself addressed a very large crowd at the Azadi Square in Tehran on Monday, June 15. According to many observers and participants, this was one of the largest rallies ever held in Iran. On the same day, scores of people were killed and injured when Basij members opened fire on a crowd. On Wednesday, Mousavi supporters marched in silence. On Thursday, the Mousavi camp organized another huge rally to commemorate those who were killed during Monday's protests. The demonstrations seemed to gather a momentum of their own.

The regime wavered for several days in the face of the massive outpouring of protests. Influential figures including Rafsanjani, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, and senior clerics in Qom, decided to pursue a "wait and see" strategy. Khamanei announced that the GC would consider objections to the electoral results but refused to offer any substantial concessions. His sermon on Friday, June 19 came as a turning point. He demanded an immediate end to the demonstrations, arguing that a difference of 11 million votes could not be due to fraud. He extended his support to both Rafsanjani and Ahmedinejad, urged the "defeated candidates" to rely on legal channels to express their complaints, and accused foreign forces, especially the United Kingdom, of inciting people to rebel against the Islamic Republic. He also claimed that "Western and Zionist" secret services were attempting to start a "velvet revolution" (*enqelab-e makhmali*) in Iran as they had done in countries such as Georgia several years ago.

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After Khamenei’s Friday Sermon, the security forces did not tolerate any dissent in the streets. Mass demonstrations faded away in the face of violent repression. Fear prevailed in the absence of organizational networks and leadership. A group of protestors tried unsuccessfully to rally in front of the Parliament building

in the Baharestan Square in central Tehran on Wednesday, June 24. The only other significant demonstration took place on the anniversary of the death of Mohammad Behesti, a leading ideologue of the Iranian Revolution, on Sunday, June 28. Around two dozen people lost their lives and more than two thousand were arrested in the events, according to official sources. Unconfirmed reports suggest a much higher fatality rate: more than a hundred.

### **The Fear of “Velvet Revolution”**

Several reasons explain the regime’s repression of the demonstrations and uncompromising attitude, despite the great cost to its legitimacy. A primary reason is the ruling elite’s deep fear of the “velvet revolution” that had taken place in numerous ex-Communist countries including Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia in the last decade. The available evidence indicates that the Iranian ruling elite is convinced that the US aims to instigate a regime change against the Islamic Republic by creating a rift between public society and the regime. The Iranian rulers are deeply concerned about the proliferation of civil society activism and associations supporting autonomous human rights, students’ rights, and women’s movements that would mobilize people against the Islamic Republic. These movements are now barely tolerated. Given the fact that post-electoral mass protests brought about the demise of ruling regimes in ex-Communist countries, it is not surprising that the Iranian ruling elite perceived the June uprising as an acute threat to its stability and survival. From their perspective, the fact that millions of people were challenging the electoral results as illegitimate was a worst case scenario. Ironically, the reformist opposition now led by Mousavi had neither the commitment nor the organizational resources and acumen to pursue a sustainable strategy of “velvet revolution.” In fact, the lack of a strong and resilient organizational base with linkages to various sectors of civil society has been a chronic weakness of the Iranian reformers. Mass arrests, draconian measures against the press, and the intense pressure exerted by the regime crippled the already meager resources of the reformers.

Another reason for the regime's uncompromising attitude is the growing power of the Pasdaran in Iranian politics. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that the Pasdaran has achieved complete political autonomy, its clout and influence have clearly increased during Ahmedinejad's presidency. While it is yet unclear whether the rise of the Pasdaran would bring an end to the factional nature of Iranian politics, the Pasdaran and its allies are evidently determined to make sure that Ahmedinejad remains President. Until recently, they exploited the aggressive US policies and rhetoric to weaken and marginalize the reformers. Although the Obama government has now eschewed the Bush administration's regime-change rhetoric and initiatives, the Iranian regime has not abandoned its discourse of "foreign enemies plotting to overthrow the Islamic Republic." After all, people who form the core of the demonstrations are the "usual suspects;" Iranians with a middle-class background, who are most exposed to Western world and who challenge the ideological conformism imposed by the regime.

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## Conclusion

The June 2009 elections and subsequent uprising have significant long-term implications for Iranian politics. First, elections that once served to manage conflict have now become a destabilizing factor. Popular participation in the elections presents a dilemma for the ruling elite. On the one hand, low rates of participation point to widespread political apathy toward and disenchantment from the political system. Thus, the regime is anxious to ensure that the turnout rate in the elections remain high. Khamenei interprets people's participation in the elections as a testimony of their commitment to the political system and a rebuttal of the Islamic Republic's enemies. On the other hand, a high turnout can only be ensured as long as the regime allows reformist candidates to run in the elections and nurtures a relatively free atmosphere of campaigning. Yet expanding the scope of political participation may result in the victory of candidates who are not favored by the regime, as happened in the 1997 presidential and 2000 parliamentary elections. The ruling elite clearly remains unable to find a solution to this dilemma; it grossly miscalculated not just the effects of a massive public participation in the 2009 election but also the buildup of widespread grievances among a substantial section of Iranian citizens. These citizens, who seem to have lost their confidence in the political system, are too many and too influential to be completely left out without any substantial political representation.

## Elections are no longer capable of managing factional conflict and rifts among the elite

Second, the fact that the Obama administration has adopted a relatively engaging and accommodative stance towards the Islamic Republic has under-

mined the ruling elite's attempts to associate all dissent with foreign-led conspiracies. In this regard, the regime's attempt to replace the US with the UK as the most dangerous enemy of Iran is unlikely to succeed. Third, the Iranian reformists went beyond legal channels and directly appealed to their supporters with some success for the first time. Hence, elections are no longer capable of managing factional conflict and rifts among the elite. During the Khatami years, the reformists were completely isolated and marginalized because they proved unwilling to go beyond legal channels to mobilize mass support. It remains unclear whether the reformers under the leadership of Mousavi will form a unified, organized, and sustainable opposition, now that Ahmedinejad seems certain to remain in power for four more years. It may be the case that political apathy will prevail as happened in the last years of Khatami's presidency. Finally, negotiations between Iran and the Western powers regarding Iran's nuclear program are likely to meet significant obstacles, since the events surrounding the June 2009 elections have further diminished the confidence between Iran and its antagonists. It will take serious diplomatic efforts just to restore the lost confidence.

## Endnotes

1. For an analytical discussion of the Iranian elections and an elaboration of this argument, see Güneş Murat Tezcür, "Intra-Elite Struggles in Iranian Elections," in *Political Participation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Ellen Lust Okar and Saloua (eds.) (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), pp. 51-74.

2. The Assembly of Experts is a body of clerics that is empowered to supervise and select the *faqih*. While members of the Assembly are popularly elected, the GC, which is controlled by the *faqih*, controls who can run for a seat in the Assembly.

3. Electoral results at the province level are available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2009/jun/15/iran1>.