

Iran's Policy Open-Ended In Wake of Election Surprise

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

No sooner had the final results of the June 24 Presidential runoff elections been announced, giving Tehran mayor Mahmood Ahmadinejad a 61.6% landslide victory over former President Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, than the word was out: The new self-styled fundamentalist President would seek a confrontationist course with the West, and especially the U.S. government. He was characterized as a die-hard conservative, committed to building the bomb, and much else (all unconfirmed, or later denied by those making the charge). It seemed as if those Anglo-American circles looking for their war, would have their excuse.

But reality is often more complex—and more interesting—than such spin. *EIR*'s preliminary assessment, from various sources, is that the new President is seeking to establish continuity with the previous government, and make peace with Iran's neighbors. There has been no escalation of rhetoric in response to the verbal provocations from certain U.S. spokesmen.

As *EIR* reported in mid-June, after the first election round, Lyndon LaRouche had hypothesized that the U.S. neo-cons tried to thwart Rafsanjani's bid for re-establishing relations with the United States. This was confirmed in press accounts: Ahmadinejad was indeed the favorite of the U.S. neo-cons, from Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, on down. Their reasoning was that such an ultra-conservative political leader would torpedo talks with the European Union over Iran's nuclear program, as well as the rapprochement with the United States, both of which Rafsanjani would have pursued. Furthermore, it was argued, Ahmadinejad's allegedly hard-line posture on domestic policy issues—like the separation of the sexes and dress code—would spark a popular revolt, leading to the

regime change the neo-cons have been dreaming of.

President George W. Bush responded according to this profile, seizing on the reports that Ahmadinejad had been among the students who took American hostages in the embassy in 1979. Five former hostages claimed they recognized him, from photos published, whereas others denied that he was the man in those pictures. Bush said that the questions raised in this regard, had to be answered. (So far, they have been answered in the negative.) Bush also urged the European Union to send a strong message to "the new person there" regarding the veto on Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities.

Secretary of State Condi Rice, echoing previous statements of Vice President Dick Cheney, added fuel to the fire, by declaring that Iran must cease *all* its nuclear programs. And in Congress, neo-con Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) used the occasion to renew the campaign for her Iran sanctions legislation. We must make "Ahmadinejad and the Iranian regime pay for their despicable behavior," she railed on June 30, as her bill gathered 50 more Congressional supporters, bringing the number of Congressional backers to 300. "Election of a leader with Ahmadinejad's past is par for the course by Iran, a rogue nation whose unsavory behavior. . . renders it one of the United States' greatest security threats."

The Institutional Question

The key power behind Ahmadinejad's victory, was the support lent by the Guardian Council, the 12-man group which vets candidates and legislation, and the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The new President is considered to be Khamenei's pupil.

Thus, to ask what Ahmadinejad will do, or what he is like,

is, in a sense, the wrong question, because it ignores the main fact of the Iranian political system: The supreme power lies in the man who is appropriately named the Supreme Leader, currently Khamenei. The President, as was painfully demonstrated in the Khatami period, does not have the power to effect radical change, as his office is checked by the Parliament and the Guardian Council. What is new in the present situation, is that all institutions today are firmly in the hands of the conservatives: Khamenei, the Guardian Council, the Judiciary, the Parliament, and the new President.

When it comes to naming negotiators for talks on the nuclear issue with Paris, London, and Berlin, it is Khamenei who decides. It was he who named Hassan Rowhani to lead the nuclear team. The selection of the cabinet will reflect his preferences, as will the government's policy outlook. Thus, the question is: What will Khamenei do?

Iranian sources, including pro-Rafsanjani and pro-reform voters, appreciate the extremely sensitive nature of the moment, and hope that the new constellation in Tehran will respond to the demands of the electorate, for fundamental economic progress. It is significant that, in his talks with the senior clergy in Qom, Ahmadinejad discussed "poverty, inflation, and unemployment," as the key challenges he must meet.

How the rest of the world responds is still an open question. In contrast to the immediately negative tones issuing from Washington, other governments have been more cautious. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and his German counterpart, Joschka Fischer, announced on July 5, that they remained committed to presenting a concrete proposal to Iran by late July or early August on the nuclear program, and would proceed with negotiations.

Who Voted for Whom, and Why

The main issues determining the results in the first round, were the economy, and the rage against perceived American interference in the internal affairs of Iran. As mayor of the capital city Tehran over the past two years, Ahmadinejad had made good on promises to represent the poor, by financing low-income housing, promoting the expansion of religious institutions and schools, and building transportation infrastructure, particularly roads and bridges to alleviate the city's massive traffic problems.

As for U.S. interference, not only had Bush and Secretary of State Condi Rice repeatedly issued public statements characterizing the Iranian elections as undemocratic, but Indian intelligence sources reported that illegal radio and television broadcasts were beamed into the country from Prague, via the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Iraq, with the message that Iranians should boycott the elections. In addition, bombings which had occurred prior to the elections in an attempt to destabilize the situation in Arab areas near the Iraqi border in Khuzestan, were attributed to U.S. secret agencies. Thus, as was widely reported, many Iranians were energized by the

U.S. interference, to go to the polls, and "send a message to Bush" by backing Ahmadinejad.

Other important factors must be taken into consideration. In the first round, there were five candidates, including Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, representing different shades and degrees of conservatism, whereas only two candidates, Mostafa Moin and Mehdi Karroubi (former Parliamentary speaker), came from the reform camp. Iranian sources point out that, had Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad faced off in the first round, the former could have won, if he had had reform votes behind him. In the second round, Rafsanjani would have had a chance, only if there had been an extraordinary turnout of reformist voters, which was not the case. Considered by reformists as the lesser of two evils, Rafsanjani was not liked.

The broad base of support for Ahmadinejad came predominantly from the poor, both urban and rural, and from the powerful military and paramilitary organizations of the Revolutionary Guards and Basiji. As spelled out in his official curriculum vitae, "With the start of the Iraqi-imposed war in 1980, Ahmadinejad rushed to the western fronts to fight against the enemy and voluntarily joined special forces of the Islamic Revolution's Guards Corps (IRGC) in 1986," where he became a commander. The Basiji are a largely voluntary force of Iranians who enrolled to fight in the Iran-Iraq war. After the cessation of hostilities in 1988, the Basiji went back to the universities, factories, farms, and so on. Now some younger Iranians have joined their ranks, as a way of paying homage to their parents who fought in the war. The paramilitary Basiji are considered a force which "keeps the ideals of the revolution alive," something Ahmadinejad has pledged to do. They have been deployed to quell student demonstrations which were demanding reforms.

In the first round of the election, these two forces were accused of tipping the scales in favor of Ahmadinejad, not only with their votes, but with their physical presence at the polls, which was considered to be intimidating to voters. Iranian sources estimate that, if such voter intimidation and/or manipulation took place, it would still not account for the huge margin of victory Ahmadinejad received.

Profile and Policies

According to official Iranian press sources, including Ahmadinejad's own Farsi home page, he comes from a humble family. The son of a blacksmith, he entered political life after having completed university graduate studies in engineering. The official state press agency *IRNA* wrote: "[Ahmadinejad] got his diploma and was admitted to the university of science and technology in the field of civil engineering after he ranked 130th in the nationwide university entrance exams in 1975. He was accepted as a master of science student at the same university in 1986 and got his Ph.D. in 1987 in the field of engineering and traffic transportation planning."

Ahmadinejad's political career included serving as "gov-

ernor of Maku and Khoy cities in the northwestern West Azerbaijan province for four years in the 1980s, and as an advisor to the governor general of the western province of Kurdistan for two years." In 1993, when he was the cultural advisor to the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, "he was appointed as governor general of the newly established northwestern province of Ardebil." After leaving his post in Ardebil in 1997, he became a "member of the scientific board of the civil engineering college of university of science and technology." In 2003, he was elected mayor of Tehran, replacing a man who was prosecuted for corruption.

During his campaign, Ahmadinejad focussed on economic and social issues, accusing his main rival, Rafsanjani, of being the candidate of the wealthy, who reaped huge profits through the oil industry, and was enmired in corruption. In contrast, Ahmadinejad cast himself as the "street sweeper," the candidate of the poor and disinherited.

The most interesting aspects of Ahmadinejad's official policy stances, is his resolute opposition to anything that smells of globalization. He has gone on record denouncing privatization (which Rafsanjani had promised to accelerate), as well as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. He charged that privatization had been carried out for selected bidders, thus stacking the deck. On his website, Ahmadinejad has criticized private banking, saying that he would prevent such banks from making millions overnight, and he has asserted the need to establish a national bank, one which would "serve the people."

In the same vein, Ahmadinejad has emphasized the importance of keeping natural resources under government control, in order to serve the needs of the population. Thus far, however, he has not elaborated on his declared plans for a "national reconstruction program." But, in one of his rare interviews prior to election, Ahmadinejad presented the outlines of his foreign policy. Speaking to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) on June 26, he said:

"The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is in principle based on the establishment of peace and justice worldwide. For this reason, the expansion of relations with all countries is on the agenda of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I mean balanced relationships, based on mutual respect and observation of each other's rights. There are very few countries that fall outside this scope. If they do, it is due to their [il]legitimacy or their blind approach to the Islamic Republic. Of course, there are hierarchies in the diplomacy. In these echelons, we give priority to the establishment of relations with our immediate neighbors, then with countries that once fell within the zone of Iran's civilization, then with Muslim states, and finally, with all countries that are not hostile towards the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Addressing the issue of the United Nations, Ahmadinejad called for greater participation and power for the Muslim nations.

Nuclear Energy a Central Policy

A central plank in his political platform is the commitment to developing nuclear energy. "Another point of our foreign policy is nuclear energy," he said. "Recently, the subject has been given a tremendous amount of publicity. It is a critical subject." Asserting that "the progress of a nation can not be obstructed," he said that "scientific, medical, and technical development of our nation is necessary." He made the case for Iran's right to such technology, saying: "Industry is intertwined with the nature of an individual. Technical knowledge has now become an integral aspect of the Iranian psyche. You can not say that the Iranian nation should not use math, should not have physicians, should not build large dams, or should not be able to build a refinery or a plane. This is an illogical claim; no one accepts it."

Ahmadinejad charged that there were "certain individuals" seeking to portray a crisis situation around the atomic energy issue, where there is none. To solve the crisis, he opted for negotiations: "I believe the problem can be solved with prudence and wisdom, by utilizing opportunity and relying on the endless power of the Iranian nation, through our self-confidence."

After his victory, Ahmadinejad was quoted saying that he would continue to pursue talks with the European Union on Iran's nuclear program, and that he would maintain the current negotiating team.

Iranian Institutional Life

Although Ahmadinejad enjoys the backing of powerful institutions, as noted, he is a young man, 49, without a visible, large political machine of experienced people. He may have to draw on other resources. Soon after this election, he conducted a number of meetings with leading institutions and personalities, first to show his gratitude for those who engineered his victory, and second, to extend a hand to those in the reform camp and other political factions, whose cooperation could lead to a form of national unity.

In a meeting with Guardian Council leaders after the election, Ahmadinejad praised the body as "one of the most important and effective organs of the system whose members are indirectly elected by the people in order to safeguard their rights and freedom." The Guardian Council, he said, was a "guarantor of the people's rights and the country's independence," as well as a safeguard against corruption. As reported by Iranian press outlets, "He expressed confidence that with the cooperation between the executive bodies, Majlis [Parliament], Judiciary, and Guardian Council more and more steps will be taken for serving the people and developing the country."

Ahmadinejad also met with senior army commanders, and on the occasion, he praised the armed forces as defenders of the nation's sovereignty. Prior to his remarks, Army Commander Major General Mohammad Salimi announced the army's readiness to cooperate with the new government, under

the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Ayatollah Khamenei. Days later, on July 6, Brigadier General Rahim Safavi, head of the Revolutionary Guards, declared the loyalty of his force of 200,000 to the new President. The Revolutionary Guards are independent of the regular armed forces, and mandated to deal with external and internal threats. They also serve directly under the Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Finally, Ahmadinejad paid a courtesy visit to the top clerical leadership, visiting Qom, the theological center of Iran.

At the same time, he reached out to his opponents, in an attempt to overcome the polarization of the country that was evident in the elections. In their first meeting, June 29, incumbent President Mohammad Khatami and Ahmadinejad emphasized the importance of utilizing the experience of the outgoing government in the new cabinet. Khatami told the press that the executive branch of government was not a one-man job.

In response, the President-elect stated his willingness to make the best use of Khatami's experience. During their meeting, he said, the two had agreed that all leading officials of the outgoing government would share their experiences with the new administration. The two are to hold a joint press conference at a later date. Other meetings have taken place with leading ministers of the outgoing government.

Separately, the defeated Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani expressed his support for the new President during Friday prayers in Tehran on July 1. For his part, the speaker of the Majlis (Parliament), Haddad Adel (a conservative), pledged that foreign policy would not change.

Reform politicians had expressed the fear that, given Ahmadinejad's backing by the Guardian Council, Revolutionary Guards, and Basiji, his election would lead to a "militarization" of public life. But judging from Ahmadinejad's interventions since June 24, it appears that he will attempt to calm down the situation, and seek to assuage fears that a dramatic turn for the worse is coming.

Iran-Iraq Rapprochement

What has been registered from Washington thus far is not encouraging, as indicated in the cited interventions by Bush and Rice. If U.S.-based source reports to *EIR* were accurate—that the neo-cons were backing Ahmadinejad in order to trigger a confrontation and perhaps justify a military or political intervention—it can be expected that the neo-cons will begin to react loudly to a series of extremely significant developments between Iran and its neighbor Iraq, since the elections.

As reported widely on July 7, Iraqi Defense Minister Saeedun al-Dulaimi arrived in Tehran for a three-day visit with the Iraqi chief of staff, and the heads of the army, air force, and navy. During their stay, the Iraqi officials were to meet with political and military leaders, first and foremost, Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani, and visit a number of military and industrial sites.

The two Defense Ministers said they would sign a military

cooperation agreement, whereby Iran would help to train Iraqi troops. In a joint press conference, Iranian Defense Minister Shamkhani said, "It's a new chapter in our relations with Iraq. We will start wide defense cooperation. We are going to form some committees which will be involved in mine clearance, identifying those missing from the war and also . . . to help train, rebuild, and modernize the Iraq army." Asked whether the U.S. might object to such cooperation—since Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and Rice, Bush, and others have repeatedly accused Iran of "meddling" in Iraq—Iranian Defense Minister Shamkhani replied, "No one can prevent us from reaching an agreement." And Iraqi Defense Minister al-Dulaimi added, "Nobody can dictate to Iraq its relations with other countries."

Shamkhani went further, to propose that Iraq reject the construction of U.S. or other foreign military bases in the country. He said that Tehran "opposes that, and asks the Iraqi government to exercise its authority in the matter."

This development has wide-ranging implications: Not only does it lead to rapprochement and political reconciliation between the two countries, which had been manipulated into a Kissinger-style population war from 1980-88, which left over a million dead; but it also lays the basis for a security arrangement in the Persian Gulf as a whole, something for which Iran has been campaigning and negotiating (with Saudi Arabia, for example) in recent years. In addition, Kuwait's Defense Minister Sheikh Jabar al-Mubarak al-Sabah is now praising the "deep ties" between his country and Iran. This news came in the wake of a highly successful trip by Hassan Rowhani, who is secretary of the National Security Council, to the region last month. Iran's concept of a security pact stipulates that the nations in the region should make security arrangements among themselves, and that all foreign military presence should be terminated. This should be considered in the context of the recent resolution passed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (see page 59).

If Iran is left to its own devices, the new government, to be sworn in Aug. 4, may prove capable of effecting positive social and economic change, as demanded by the electorate. The gravest danger is that, whatever the Ahmadinejad government turns out to be, the neo-con crazies in Washington, and/or Israel, will exploit the hard-line profile of the new leader as a pretext for military aggression or political destabilization.

HOTLINE

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