

Reissner, Johannes

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The New Gap between Iran and the West

The Presidential Election As an Expression of a Fundamental Shifting of Power

Johannes Reissner

The outcome of the presidential election in June 2005 was indicative of fundamental social and political developments in Iran 26 years after its Revolution. The surprise victory by populist neo-Conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reflected resentment amongst poorer Iranians. Moreover, a younger generation of politicians whose politics were primarily shaped during their country's eight-year war against Iraq (1980–1988) has now become the tone-setting political class, including in government. Self-assurance is the new credo, and by no means just for those who won the election. Inspired by China's example, Iran is determined to use its wealth of energy resources to go its own way without bowing to the imperious West. But this does not necessarily imply anti-Western politics. Instead, Iran may assertively distance itself from the West and either make clear demands or give the cold shoulder, as it sees fit.

The sometimes highly contradictory statements made by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad both before and since his election and also his background may tempt external observers to label the new Iranian president a Conservative populist. But such labeling is an insufficient basis for second-guessing his future policies, assuming that it is he who will be determining them in the first place. Regardless of speculations about Ahmadinejad's future role and policies, the outcome of the latest presidential election highlights several fundamental developments in Iranian society and politics:

- ▶ The Conservative elite may now dominate all the elected and non-elected state institutions, but

- ▶ open internal power struggles and generational conflicts have now broken out within its ranks;
- ▶ younger politicians whose outlook has been shaped more by the war with Iraq than by the Revolution are rising to prominence; and
- ▶ the gulf between Iran's social classes has once again become a political issue.

These developments will certainly require further, more extensive analysis, but at the same time the main current of the changes that have occurred should be borne in mind here, to clarify the hypothesis summed up by the title of this paper regarding the opening up of a 'new gap' between Iran and the West.

Conservatives pulling all the strings

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's new president, which also came as a surprise to the Iranian people, places both the elected and non-elected state institutions in the hands of the Conservatives, thereby affording both Ayatollah Khomeini, the Leader of the Revolution, and the regime's political elite a greater feeling of security. For under the surface in the Conservative camp there had been lingering mistrust that the Reformists are ultimately intent on changing the system and enjoy the backing of the West. And although the Conservatives had always reached some kind of arrangement with President Khatami and his allies, at the same time they had constantly endeavoured to muzzle the Reformist movement, mainly with the help of the Guardian Council and the judiciary.

Indeed, the sole aims of string-pulling by the Guardian Council in both the 2004 general election and the recent presidential election and of the legal clampdown on the Reformist movement was to oust from political office those individuals whose loyalty to the 'system' was in doubt. This was nothing other than a struggle between those who see themselves as true champions of the Revolution and those who are regarded as 'not being one of us'. Appeals by the Leader of the Revolution for the nation to put up a unified front were merely designed to stem excesses in this conflict that might jeopardise the state, but he neither could, nor wanted to prevent such a clash. The prominent role played by mistrust in Iran is perfectly captured by the explanation given by well-known journalist Amir Mohebbian, from the Conservative newspaper *Resalat*, when it became apparent to general astonishment after the 2004 general election that the new fundamentalists in parliament saw eye to eye with the Reformists on many political issues: "Ah yes, but people trust us."

Ahmadinejad's election victory means that the Conservatives now bear sole responsibility for Iran's domestic and

foreign policies. However, in spite of all the differences between the Iranian state apparatus and society, it is highly unlikely that this situation will prompt an uprising by the 'freedom-loving people' against the 'regime of the mullahs,' as hoped for by American hardliners and groups of Iranian exiles with pipe dreams about regime change. Instead, there is every indication of fresh divides among the Conservative political elite.

The "Principle-ists"

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is regarded as one of the 'people of principle' or "principle-ists" as English papers in Iran as well as the BBC monitoring service render the Persian word *osulgaran*, basically meaning 'fundamentalists.' The Conservative victors in the February 2004 general election adopted this positively charged translation to describe themselves, especially the political party Abadgaran, or 'Builders of Islamic Iran,' whose ranks include the Iranian parliament's present speaker, Gholam Ali Haddad Adel. In the run-up to that general election, despite all the Conservatives' deep-seated political enmity towards the United States, now and then they did not shrink back from comparing themselves with American neo-Conservatives as a religiously fundamentalist, but also successful, modern political movement.

Soon after the new parliament was formed in May 2004, the top priority for the political elite in Iran, alongside the nuclear stand-off with the West, became fielding candidates for the presidential election. Between the Reformist parties, and even more clearly among the ranks of the Conservatives, genuine competition arose as the latter vied to put up a candidate who would stand a real chance against the then 70-year-old former President Rafsanjani, who only decided to stand just before the election. In the autumn before the election the Conservatives had formed a 15-member 'Coordinating Council of Revolutionary Forces'. The little we know

about the Council's activities clearly suggests that even amongst the Conservatives there is considerable political rivalry, which is strongly marked by generational issues. Blame for the lack of unity was laid at the door of the 'young generation'. As early as the following winter, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati broke away from the Coordinating Council and announced his candidature as an 'independent principle-ist,' only to desist from standing once Rafsanjani announced that he was willing to take office again.

Ahmadinejad was by no stretch of the imagination the Coordinating Council's first-choice candidate. Shortly before the election, pointing to his poor performance in the polls, his fellow Conservative candidates are said to have spread the rumour that he was withdrawing his candidacy. It may be that Ahmadinejad was too radical for the 'Builders of Islamic Iran,' who had elected him mayor of Tehran, for he is a member of the Central Committee, considered an extreme grouping of individuals 'sacrificing themselves for the Revolution'.

So what characterises these 'principle-ists'? Their leaders are aged between 40 and 50, which means that they are too old to belong to the generation born after the Revolution which Western analysts have frequently cited as the decisive force behind the push for reforms, but too young to qualify as people who actually engineered the Revolution. Instead, they belong to an age group whose politics were shaped quite specifically by the eight-year war against Iraq (1980–1988). They are people for whom the spiritual strength provided by religion and a basic nationalism put to the test in active defence of their country constitute an unshakeable, pragmatic whole. Yet they resist being typecast in the dichotomy of 'ideologues' versus 'pragmatists'. Instead, they openly intend to vaunt their set of principles and participate in globalisation on their own terms. The social tensions that underlay Ahmadinejad's election can be summed up in this single question of theirs: Why should we who fought and

suffered for an Islamic Iran reap fewer fruits from the Revolution than those who are constantly stealing a glance at the West?

This generation has very few clerics who are politically-minded mullahs, though it does derive support from rather traditional religious mullahs in the background. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad is said to have chosen Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi as religious authority (*marja'*, literally meaning 'source of emulation'), and Mesbah Yazdi is an ayatollah notorious for being a 'firebrand' of revolutionary Islam, a man who has said that the Revolution was not waged to sustain democracy.

It is not the vehement sermons of the old mullahs of the Revolution that have shaped the political understanding of the 'principle-ists,' even if they feel more drawn to their views than to the more intellectual treatises written by Abdolkarim Soroush, once a figurehead for the Reformists. But this does not mean to say that the 'principle-ists' are anti-intellectuals; it is just that theology and philosophy are deemed less important now. Many intellectuals who are also 'principle-ists' may have read the philosophy expounded by Professor Jürgen Habermas as well, and in one telling instance in 2003 the Conservative newspaper *Resalat* printed in full the lecture he gave in Tehran, translated into Persian. Yet this does not necessarily make anyone a disciple of Habermas. And although being able to refer to oneself as a 'man of letters' is still a prestigious claim in Iranian society (the parliamentary speaker cultivates his reputation as a translator of Kant), for the 'principle-ists' science and technology which augur progress count for more. This mixture of fundamental religious convictions and a predilection for technology is characteristic of all, not just Islamic mainstream fundamentalists.

A new role for the military?

Where the 'principle-ists' are concerned, the combination of basic underlying

religious principles and a fascination for technology should also be viewed against the backdrop of the formative experience of Iran's eight-year war against Iraq. When that war broke out, Ahmadinejad volunteered to join the Revolutionary Guards, where he served in a special unit. Three other Conservative presidential candidates, Mohsen Reza'i, Bagher Qalibaf and Ali Larijani, also had military backgrounds. Reza'i, the secretary of the Expediency Council, who withdrew his candidacy shortly before the presidential election, was long time Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Guards. After the student demonstrations in July 1999, the suppression of which caused great bloodshed, former police chief Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf signed the letter written by the military's top brass in which Khatami had warned that the armed forces might intervene if such demonstrations against the Leader of the Revolution and the regime were repeated. Many of the Conservatives voted into parliament in the 2004 general election are said to be military men in civilian clothes. The Iranian opposition in exile puts their number at more than 40.

However, repeated warnings about the creeping spread of the political influence of the military—and of the Revolutionary Guards Corps in particular—stem not only from the opposition in exile, but also from inside Iran itself. And given the economic role played by the Revolutionary Guards and the Volunteer Corps, or Basij, via the positions they occupy in revolutionary foundations, such influence should not be underestimated. However, at present it seems unlikely that Iran's military can expect to play a role on the scale of that enjoyed by its counterpart in Pakistan, for Iranian society has been extremely wary of the military holding sway over politics ever since the era of the Pahlavi shahs (1925–79). Not for nothing did Mohsen Reza'i stress during his election campaign that he had long ago shed his military uniform in order to go into politics. Furthermore, an

increase in the number of former military officers in politics should also be seen as linked to the rise of a new generation, namely the age group whose development was shaped by the war with Iraq. So the problem of growing political prominence for the military will have to be monitored, especially seeing as members of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij are said to have been involved in the 'irregularities' in the elections which, had they never occurred, might have resulted in Ahmadinejad not reaching the final ballot.

The election victory:

A "tsunami of the 'principle-ists'"

One headline in the hardline newspaper *Keyhan* described Ahmadinejad's election victory, which also came as a complete surprise to the Iranian people, as a "tsunami of the 'principle-ists'." The elections did not meet the standards required to describe them as 'fair and free'. As has become almost customary nowadays, the Guardian Council had rejected politically unsuitable candidates. Voters were influenced by their local Friday preachers, and on the day of the election itself both the Basij and the Revolutionary Guards had had their hand in the run of events. When the votes were counted on 18 June, for a long time the former Reformist parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi was in second place, close behind leading candidate Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Only late in the day did Ahmadinejad just pip Karrubi to the post for second place and thereby reach the second and final ballot, which he then proceeded to win, beating Rafsanjani by 61.7% to 35%, with an election turnout of 59.8% (3% less than in the first ballot).

In an open letter to the Leader of the Revolution, Mehdi Karrubi complained bitterly, but his protests were brushed aside. Later on, in a second open letter, he called for the results in various provinces to be checked. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani also complained about election fraud, but said he would not refer the matter to any

judges, since they would anyway be neither willing nor able to see that justice was done. He added that he would leave the matter in God's hands. President Khatami announced that he would submit a dossier on election fraud to the Leader of the Revolution, the parliamentary speaker and the elected president. However, for the time being the 'tsunami' of Ahmadinejad's victory appears to have drowned out any protests.

Ahmadinejad's victory can be attributed first and foremost to popular support from ordinary people and the lower middle class, namely those voters neglected by the Reformists. "We couldn't translate the slogan of democracy into daily bread," acknowledged Mohammad-Reza Khatami, president of the Islamic Iranian Participation Front, the leading Reformist party.

The new gulf that has opened up between the rich and poor in Iran is blamed essentially on the economic policy of reconstruction and structural change implemented by Rafsanjani since the early 1990s, which gave rise to *nouveaux riches* and corruption, and benefited the upper middle class that tends to identify with the Reformist movement.

Given this undercurrent of a major social divide and resentment against the rich pro-Western element in Iranian society, Ahmadinejad managed to kindle hope amongst his followers. Justice was the watchword of his election campaign, and his slogan was "It's possible and we can do it!". So Ahmadinejad's election campaign was more about giving people hope and self-assurance than about announcing a certain politics. And his credibility was shored up by his reputation as a man of integrity and someone who was prepared to put his shoulder to the wheel.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, on the other hand, had said he wanted to embrace the relationship with the USA. In so doing he broke a taboo imposed by the Leader of the Revolution and made himself the West's preferred candidate. Yet for the 17 million people who voted for Ahmadinejad, Rafsan-

jani was nothing more than a figure symbolising the corrupt super-rich. For them the relationship with the USA after 26 years of American opposition to Iran and sanctions are of secondary importance, as is the country's nuclear programme. As it turned out, Rafsanjani's election campaign, which was tailored very much to the younger generation living in northern Tehran, was easily tarred by his opponents as 'offensive' and 'pro-Western'. Indeed, it is not really clear why the Iranian electorate should be won over by Hashemi stickers printed in English, rather than Persian.

By contrast, Ahmadinejad's populism worked because in principle he approved of the historical development of the Islamic Republic of Iran and sent out the message that any wrong turns taken could be overcome with God's help and some self-assurance. Ahmadinejad uses the slogans of the Revolution not in attempt to turn back the clock, but rather as familiar references which people can latch onto before starting to look forward. Debates about structures, the type of regime and democracy are 'not his thing'; he sees himself as a 'street cleaner' who sweeps clear the road ahead and wants to have an impact *within* the country's structures. His negative election message about democracy, reminiscent of statements by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, saying that "the Revolution wasn't waged to install democracy," is a reference to "Western liberal democracy." In its place he proposes „religion-based democracy“, which the Leader of the Revolution declared back in 2000 to be a core element of the Islamic Republic of Iran's image of itself. For Ahmadinejad this form of democracy is the means to an end, a way of securing justice, not a fetishised end in itself. His call for greater participation by underpinning the autonomy of the country's local authorities and provinces is in keeping with such an outlook.

Certain similarities between such a participation-based understanding of democracy and the emphasis of social justice and semi-official notions of Islam in Turkey,

Malaysia and Indonesia are unmistakable. But there is a question mark over whether the current 'bottom-up' mobilisation will not once again be smothered 'from above'. Another good question is how the health of the country's economy could possibly be restored without any structural changes being implemented.

What kind of politics?

Iran's president and prime minister are only responsible for the country's executive. The main thrust of Iranian policy, especially with respect to security and foreign policy issues, is determined by the Leader of the Revolution and the country's Security Council, and in legislative matters the Expediency Council (still chaired by Rafsanjani) plays a key role as the body mediating between parliament and the Guardian Council. On top of this institutional stranglehold on its freedom to organise things the way it wants, particularly where Iran's development is concerned the new government is bound to its Five-Year Plan and 20-Year Perspective. Ahmadinejad has long since revised his, in some cases, drastic election statements against privatisation and the institutions of a market economy ("the stock market is a gambling den"), and his economic policy ideas are now geared towards a 'clean' market economy with a strong social and cooperative component.

In his struggle for justice and against corruption, the new president finds himself faced with the dilemma of having to take action against the Revolutionary Guards, amongst others, who are actively involved in the country's existing economic structures and non-transparent, economically powerful foundations. For this reason, one observer of the situation in Iran neatly summed up Ahmadinejad's situation as that of a "Robin Hood in the service of the Sheriff of Nottingham."

Consequently, the kind of changes that can be expected will affect not structures, but personnel, and will do so to a greater

extent than normal in the country's ministries following a presidential election. The main focus will be on the Ministry of Petroleum, which has a reputation for being a hotbed of corruption. Resentment against the oil industry technocrats who are perceived as being Rafsanjani supporters and the interests of Islamist technicians in securing lucrative posts for themselves will probably also be a factor here. However, extensive personnel changes could impact negatively on oil production and the natural gas industry and exacerbate the country's 'brain drain'. To begin with the new government looks set to use subsidies to keep its promise of greater social justice. High oil prices would provide the money required to do this.

With respect to freedom, whether freedom of the press, freedom of expression or the freedom to live one's life as one chooses, Ahmadinejad found himself confronting the full impact of visions of horror spread both within Iran and above all abroad, portraying him as an ultra-Conservative 'obscurantist' intent on setting the clock back, a man whose sole aim was to rescind painstakingly wrested freedoms. The media, which confuse reforms with a Western outlook, reported that Ahmadinejad had had a few trendy pizzerias and cafés in northern Tehran closed down, but failed to mention the large number of similar restaurants that still characterise the cityscape.

Measures designed to plaster over the social gulf will probably be taken, and clothing regulations are an only too well-known way of doing this. However, there is no reason to expect the full abolition of the freedoms gained in the past, and for more serious reasons than the fact that Ahmadinejad's cultural advisor has promised almost utopian press freedoms. The regime knows that the young people who voted for Ahmadinejad want for themselves much of what the golden youth of the 'Aghazadeh,' i.e. the sons of influential and prosperous parents (including mullahs), enjoy in northern Tehran.

Under Khatami in particular, the regime's ruling classes had spread the view that society could be kept ticking over by showing a certain degree of largesse, and that there is therefore no point in banning satellite dishes and modern lifestyles as long as the regime itself is not under threat. Yet Ahmadinejad's election makes this outlook even more solid than it was under his predecessor. Moreover, it is of course clear that the post-election situation does not mean that social and politico-ideological differences have suddenly gone away. It wasn't just the Reformist newspapers that worked out for the new president that he had only gained the votes of 35% of the electorate. During his election campaign Ahmadinejad himself, taking up a slogan used by the Reformist movement, stressed that Iran belonged to all Iranians. And even the Leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khamene'i, is evidently aware of the considerable tensions in Iranian society, for in his first reaction after the election he prohibited any public celebrations.

What can the West expect?

This is another question for which there is not yet any specific answer, though it may well be useful to ask ourselves the counter question put by many Iranians, namely what can Iran expect (yet) from the West? Naturally a question mark hangs over how Ahmadinejad will behave towards the USA, but most Iranians typically believe that the ball is in Washington's court. That attitude gained further purchase with the elections and evidently impacts on relations with Europe and especially on the nuclear negotiations.

From the very outset, President Bush deemed the elections unfair and not free, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice condemned them as "thoroughly out of step" with democratic trends in the region. Let us hope that both these politicians take the social and political changes in Iran, as expressed in the election results, more seriously than their own words. Meanwhile,

for the time being relations between the USA and Iran have continued to deteriorate. Some US media have made much of the fact that Ahmadinejad is suspected of having been involved in the occupation of the American Embassy after the Revolution in 1979. Some European media followed them in this. For the Iranians this kind of behaviour is merely further proof of the West's double standards, for the self-same media have never made much of the fact that many of the leading Reformists were once ringleaders behind the embassy's occupation.

For the time being, the regularly trotted out view that the regime would be perfectly willing to take pragmatic steps if it felt secure and if the Reformists could not be attributed with having usefully improved relations with the USA, can only be deemed theoretically accurate speculation. Ahmadinejad's usually abbreviated statement "We don't need America" gives us no clues as to his specific future policy vis-à-vis the USA. The quotation in full reads as follows: "We are self-assured and capable enough not to be dependent on the USA for our progress and development," with the stress on "self-assured."

Accordingly, Iran's interest in adopting a pragmatic attitude towards the Americans in the immediate vicinity, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the same time restricting their room for manoeuvre either diplomatically or physically whenever possible, is unlikely to change. The visit by the Iraqi defence minister and prime minister and the conclusion of a security agreement with Iraq are one indication of this; another is the appeal made to the USA by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which Iran now has observer status alongside India and Pakistan, calling for a date for the withdrawal of their troops from Central Asia.

Europe's relations with Iran are characterised by sustained booming economic relations and the nuclear debate, both of which look set to be affected by Iran's boosted self-assurance, which by no means

just applies to Ahmadinejad's supporters, but also to Iranian nationalists in favour of reform. They all share the view that Iran is really not dependent on European capital, since there is certainly no shortage of capital in the Persian Gulf which since 11 September 2001 has no longer been primarily invested internationally, but rather increasingly also in their country. What is more, the Europeans' political support and recognition are only of limited use. Past experience has shown that European support brings little, especially where a breakthrough in relations with the USA is concerned. Ultimately, foreign trade will continue to diversify with the focus on Asia—the current buzzword being 'Greater Asia,' to which Iran feels it belongs. Meanwhile, the technology Iran needs and which is only available in Europe it will simply buy.

Iran has sought to diversify its foreign trade by leaning towards Asia since the early 1990s and at difficult times in the country's 'critical dialogue' this has also been invoked as a threat. However, the fact that over the last four years Europe's share (EU-15) of worldwide exports to Iran has averaged 44.4%, would appear to suggest that the vision of a diversification of Iranian foreign trade that would prove damaging to Europe remains merely a distant prospect. Nonetheless, visions *can* influence political attitudes. The word is that when calls for tender are issued, preference should be given to domestic or non-European bids offering almost the same quality. In view of the anticipated sweeping personnel changes, Europeans would be well advised to broaden their business contacts.

The protracted nuclear negotiations have, if anything, damaged European-Iranian relations. The predominant view in Iran is that at best the Europeans mean well, but are too weak and have too little to offer. The Europeans, however, are convinced of their own good intentions and consider their efforts and what they can offer for Iran's long-term development as

valuable. According to the *Financial Times* the nuclear negotiations have reached the point at which both sides are now only playing the 'blame game'. For the time being, the key factor is that both sides have expressed their willingness to persevere with the negotiations. Ahmadinejad's election will primarily affect the mood of the talks. For although it is not he who will decide on the nuclear issue, Iran's greater assertiveness since his election will no doubt increase the already extensive pressure not to 'give in' whatever happens, whilst at the same time waiting impatiently for some movement in US policy.

European politicians involved with Iran will have to get used to the idea of having less reform-minded dialogue partners and realise that the ready understanding of old—in discussions about civil society, democracy and human rights—could become more problematic. On the other hand, in the best-case scenario it is conceivable that the Iranians will more clearly formulate their own interests and demands. More than ever, the country's new-found self-assurance is borne along on both Islamic and nationalistic currents. Consequently, Ahmadinejad could strike more of a chord than condemnations of him before the election as a man with 'ultra-Conservative' or 'Taliban' views might have suggested would be the case. For at the very least self-assurance brings with it a sense of protection against external interference and paternalism, leaving the country undisturbed to work out where its own interests lie.

As mentioned before, the higher level of self-assurance will not necessarily entail an anti-Western policy, and the Iranians' lively interest in cultural relations and intellectual discussion with the West is unlikely to wane very rapidly. Meanwhile, where Europe's policy on Iran is concerned, more extensive communication on issues of substance, and greater focus on sounding out positions and opportunities for cooperation will be important, even if the talks themselves end up proving more difficult.

To begin with—and not just against the backdrop of the nuclear negotiations—Europe’s long-term interest of tying Iran into international structures, which would also serve the country’s future development, may prove even harder to convey. The Iranians’ style of politics is unlikely to change much either. Drawing on Ahmadinejad’s slogan—“It’s possible and we can do it”—one could also sum up this outlook as follows: “It is going to work out somehow, and somehow we are going to make it.”

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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