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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Iran

A New President with Even More Aggressive Policies

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משה קורניק

Iranian politics continue to draw the considerable attention of its citizens and the international community due to its policies, which have weighty implications for the West as well as for Israel's security.

Almost 27 years after ascendance of the Islamic régime, it appears that the Islamic Revolution has yet to conclude, with the Iranian people still seeking some method to realize the yearnings that fuelled its fires. During the last presidential election (24 June 2005), Iranian voters cast their lots with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. A relatively unknown politician, Ahmadinejad symbolized dedication to the Revolution above all else. A politician who had succeeded in reviving the belief that solutions to social ills were rooted in a return to the revolution's fundamental values, he was viewed as a harbinger of the change sought by the man in the street. The conservatives consequently overwhelmed the dissidents and received a renewed mandate from the people to realize the revolution's promise.

The Iranian regime thereby proved its political stability once again. That stability has survived the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini (1989) and the election of Dr. Sayyed Khatami (1997), who was not the candidate preferred by the ruling elite. Also striking is the continued high rate of popular political involvement. Within the stringent restrictions imposed by the régime, remnants reminiscent of elections held in freer, more liberal régimes were sustained – in the breadth of positions taken by the candidates, the colourful campaigning and the lively political atmosphere. And, despite the conservatives' power, the ideological identity of the candidate elected was vague – again a rare event for the region's politics. Yet, despite appearances, these elections were not free. About 1,000 candidates were disqualified by the Council of Supervisors, with only 8 candidates finally approved (7 actually ran for election) – all loyal to the Revolution. Given the reversal of trends, from the growing strength of reform circles between 1997 and 2000 to the subsequent return of the conservatives, it was clear that after they had consolidated their control of the local councils (following the 2003 elections) and the Majles (2004), the conservatives would also gain the presidency. However, it remained uncertain as to whether the voters would turn to Ahmadinejad, the most conservative among the candidates, especially as he was relatively unknown.

The son of a metal industry labourer, Ahmadinejad stressed his modest origins and Spartan lifestyle throughout the campaign. He presented himself as a redeemer of the oppressed and made promises that could have been spouted by Robin Hood. The conservative establishment (including its Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei), together with the security forces, supported him. He was also perceived as unblemished at the same time that he stressed the values of Islamic justice and morality, the fairness and humility, a combination that won him wide support. Ahmadinejad was thus the candidate of the simple man. His campaign slogans were also simple, catchy and moving: "It's possible" and "I can do it."

In the short term, the election's primary winner – apart from Ahmadinejad's personal triumph – is the ruling regime, the "rule of the wise" – headed by the conservatives. Conservatives once more control elected institutions (the *Majles*, the presidency and local councils) and appointed institutions (the Supreme Leader, the judiciary, the Council of Supervisors and the security forces), in addition to the revolutionary apparatus (e.g., the Revolutionary Guards, the Fund for the Oppressed, the Fund for War Heroes). After years of rule alongside his well-entrenched friend and opponent, Ali Rafsanjani, and the conclusion of 8 years of the reformist Khatami's term of office, Khamenei has reinforced his leadership. However, the conservatives' control at the main centres of power may eventually threaten their position, whether by intensifying internal social tensions or by exacerbating tensions with the outside world. Thus, although the elections revealed the weakness of reformist circles, the support given Ahmadinejad expresses disappointment with the Revolution's outcomes to date and the search for new solutions. The internal struggle has yet to be decided; within such an environment, the rift between various social sectors can only deepen.

The short time that has elapsed since Ahmadinejad's election precludes reaching decisive conclusions regarding the new president's future policies although his declarations and initial programs indicate his determination to promote a radical agenda. Although the régime appears stable, the ayatollahs continue to rule and the conservatives have tightened their grip over power. Holding of elections enabled the orderly transfer of power from one government (reformist) to its opposite (conservative), itself an important expression of continuity. Conditions (the economy, foreign relations) are also more promising than in the past. Ahmadinejad has therefore inherited a much more positive reality than did his predecessors, Khamenei in 1981 (due to internal convulsions and war), Rafsanjani in 1989 (following the death of Khomeini and culmination of the war with Iraq) and Khatami in 1997 (who introduced zeal for reform). Whereas Rafsanjani searched for ways to motivate reconstruction, Ahmadinejad's task is ostensibly simpler, that is, return to the Revolution's original goals of social justice and economic well-being. Despite the greater long-term difficulty of accomplishing these tasks, such programs are crucial for the recruitment of public support in the short term.

Within this context, any increase in the price of oil represents an additional asset. Every dollar added to the price of oil represents an annual increase in Iran's national income of \$1 billion. At the time of writing, the price of oil stood at \$60 a barrel, providing the government with an additional, effective instrument for fulfilling its promises and purchasing loyalty. The president's opponents, for their part, are disappointed, in shock and effectively paralysed – a state of affairs granting the new president a certain grace period. Events in the region, especially the results of the war in Iraq (the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, Saddam's ouster and America's sinking in the Iraqi quagmire) represent other important assets. Under these circumstances, the US will find it much more difficult to recruit partners for a war against Iran, either in Europe or at home.

The new Iranian government is nonetheless facing serious challenges. Conflicts have arisen between the government and the elites (intellectuals as well as the economic and social elite). A far greater number of disappointed sectors (e.g., reformists, Rafsanjani) are now evident. Several senior clerics who oppose theocracy in principle are presenting an ideological challenge of major proportions (even if adopting a conciliatory tone). Moreover, Ahmadinejad, the political novice, has brought with him an equally inexperienced team to contend with these especially weighty tasks in this highly challenging period.

Four of his candidates failed to receive approval by the conservative *Majles*, signally that it has no intention of being a rubber stamp parliament. Another important source of power is, of course, the support of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, who is the president's superior. Not less important is the need to respond to the high expectations of broad segments of the society, a far from easy assignment. The increase in the price of oil, a benefit in the short term, may nevertheless raise expectations even further and prove to be a disadvantage.

It will also be difficult for the new government to veer from its declared path, at least in the short term. Ideologically based régimes are frequently forced to deviate from their principles in order to cope with the difficulties of managing a nation irrespective of their lack of eagerness to adopt such measures. Deviations from orthodoxy are even more difficult when external enemies are intent on toppling the régime. Albeit the lack of alternatives, the implementation of change is liable to take longer than observers anticipate.

A large part of the population has indeed become disillusioned and is now demanding reform; yet, some of the reforms initiated during the Khatami term will not be easy to cancel. Although Ahmadinejad is liable to surprise us and support selected reforms, he is unlikely to do so directly. After his short post-election honeymoon, he will have to show results. Opponents at home will reorganize and renew their activities; in addition, the US is likely to exert more numerous direct (on Iran and its supporters in the region) and indirect (on Europe) pressures.

In the face of growing signs of disappointment at home, captured by demands for social justice, government declarations of its intent to combat corruption essentially acknowledge that the current regime was also tainted. Thus, Iran's new image has yet to be finalized in a period of intensifying internal contradictions. The results of the US war in Iraq may impinge on the strategic-regional level but, perhaps more importantly, on the ideological level (consider Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's espousal of an anti-theocratic stance and the Iraqi battle for freedom). All these raise questions regarding the course developments will take in Iran. Ahmadinejad's preoccupation with radical declarations bares his efforts to done the dress of a national leader, orthodox in his religious views, determined and faithful to his word.

Irrespective of their salience for the home audience, Ahmadinejad's extreme pronouncements regarding the nuclear option, Israel, Iraq and the US are sincere but betray his inexperience in the international arena. Since his gaining power, a clear shift has been observed from the political openness enjoyed under Khatami to a stress on economic and social issues. In the meantime, European states have become more committed to pressuring Iran to modify its positions even though they do not know how to translate their intentions into operative actions. Part of the problem apparently lies in the US failure to formulate a clear policy regarding Iran. Nevertheless, with forces located threateningly close, the US continues to criticize Iran's policies in very harsh terms. To President Bush, Iran and Syria are the mainstays of international terror, with Iran bearing the additional charge of attempting to develop a nuclear potential – the most serious indictment possible in American eyes. Iran, on its part, is taking a not less abrasive stance – condemning Western culture, US policy in Iraq and its support of Israel – while refusing to abandon its nuclear program. Iran lies in the geographic heart of a region having great importance for the free world – between Iraq and Afghanistan, between the Persian Gulf and the autonomous republics of the former Soviet Union, in proximity to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Iran consequently has a vital interest in the events unfolding in its environment and is ready to act in order to further its goals. For those very same reasons, the free world has a real interest in limiting Iran's potentially dangerous intervention in regional developments. Iran's activities in the area of nuclear energy currently represent the main challenge to the West. At this stage, it appears that in the long-term, we will be unable to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear capability; hence, the goal entails preventing Iran from achieving such capability under an Islamic régime. Iran itself feels that the times are propitious: the US appears helpless against Iranian policy, Europe is doing too little too late while Russia is apparently intent on approaching Iran. Iran therefore sees no reason to deviate from its declared course. The West's response remains inchoate.

Israel has a special interest in Iran due to Iran's ideology (Islamic politics and the suicide terrorism that it encourages), anti-Israeli positions, intrusions within the borders of Israel (with the aid of Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad), but especially the nuclear issue. Ahmadinejad has betrayed himself as resoundingly extremist with respect to Israel. His October 2005 statements regarding a world free of the US and of Israel succinctly expresses his views at the same time that they earned him some favour locally. In such a reality, Israel fears that the nuclear clock is ticking, with no power is willing to take any action in its defence. Much has recently been said regarding the possibility of a Western and/or Israeli operation against Iran's nuclear installations. Inflammatory rhetoric by senior Israeli officials continues to signal that Iran is on Israel's "hit list". Such statements encourage, in turn, even more fiery statements on the Iranian side, culminating in a vicious cycle of increasingly more threatening statements. The fact that these are accompanied by operational capabilities (long-range missiles) accentuates the menace.

