

Iran's 'Election': What Happened? What Does It Mean?

[Mehdi Khalaji](#), [Mohsen Sazegara](#), [Patrick Clawson](#), and [Michael Singh](#)

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On June 16, 2009, Mehdi Khalaji, Mohsen Sazegara, Patrick Clawson, and Michael Singh addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss the disputed reelection of Iran's incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad on June 12 amid a wave of mass protests and charges of vote rigging.

Mehdi Khalaji is a Washington Institute senior fellow, Patrick Clawson is the Institute's deputy director for research, Michael Singh is the Ira Weiner Fellow at the Institute, and Mohsen Sazegara is an Iranian dissident and political activist. Following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Mehdi Khalaji

Iran has been going through a quiet revolution for some time, in which the nature of the regime has shifted from a clerical-civilian administration to a military government. The United States is no longer confronting an Islamic republic, but rather an autocratic, totalitarian regime represented by leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad, and backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

What is happening in Iran today is part of a twenty-year power struggle between Khamenei, who assumed power in 1989, and the other veterans of the Islamic Revolution, such as former presidents Akbar Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami, as well as current opposition presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Khamenei has never been comfortable working with the leaders of the 1979 revolution; he prefers that leadership positions be held by individuals he elevated to power, that is, those who owe their political careers to him. The nature of this power struggle was made clear by Ahmadinezhad in the televised preelection debates, when the president stressed that he was not just competing with Mousavi, but also with Khatami, Rafsanjani, and those around them. Within this struggle, Khamenei's recent election manipulation represents a new level of self-confidence and a new determination to suppress his rivals.

In the coming days, as the government resists calls to hold a new election, protests will grow in size as more and more onlookers join the demonstrations. The United States will soon face either an emboldened military government in Iran or witness tremendous changes in the Iranian political system.

Mohsen Sazegara

The democratic struggle happening in Iran today is a reaction to four years of the nation's humiliation and oppression by the government of Ahmadinezhad and Khamenei. The popular street protest on June 15 was the first time in the 120-year struggle for freedom in Iran that there was such mass mobilization without the clergy, and the first such mobilization focused on a democratic, rather than a religious or revolutionary, demand. The ideals of the utopian Islamic Revolution have been converted to the democratic demands of liberalism, civil society, and human rights.

European countries and the UN secretary-general have issued positive responses to the Iranian public's call for democracy. Now the people of Iran are waiting for the United States to act. Rumors among the younger generation report that the United States has given Khamenei the green light to suppress the Iranian people, in return for engagement and compromise on the nuclear issue. To counter such rumors, the U.S. government should tell Iran it will not recognize any government that does not represent the will of the people. What President Barack Obama said on June 15 was not enough; he should promise the Iranian people that their vote will be respected.

Patrick Clawson

For twenty years, Khamenei has warned of the dangers threatening the Islamic Republic, particularly what he refers to as post-modern imperialism through the West's cultural invasion. He has warned that the West would provoke a "velvet revolution" similar to that in Czechoslovakia in 1989, which witnessed the very rapid overthrow of an apparently rock-solid government. Czech dissident Vaclav Havel praised the key role of U.S.-sponsored radio broadcasts in the velvet revolution, much as Polish dissidents spoke of the key role of U.S. support for the Solidarity trade union in the overthrow of communist rule in Poland.

From Khamenei's perspective, the developments of the past few weeks demonstrate his prescience. The initial

campaign efforts of Mousavi, a rather uncharismatic figure, were "pathetic," yet today hundreds of thousands of people are wearing green and treating him like a rock star. To the conspiratorial mind, this is evidence of powerful forces behind Mousavi. Indeed, forces are behind him, but they are former presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani, not the West. In response, Khamenei decided to crush the hopes of change through an election with vote rigging so blatant as to show that no election would be allowed to change the system. Furthermore, the hardliners blame the foreign media for the protests that have erupted. In short, Khamenei was so afraid of a velvet revolution that he has provoked one.

The protests will only confirm in Khamenei's mind his oft-stated view that the nuclear issue is just an excuse used by the West to advance its plot to overthrow the Islamic Republic. He will be more convinced than ever that if the nuclear issue were settled, the West would find another excuse with which to advance its true goal. To him, any compromise on the nuclear issue will only feed the West's efforts to overthrow him. No matter how often the U.S. government says it is willing to live and work with Khamenei's Islamic Republic, he will not believe a word of it. And, of course, all of this makes it more difficult to negotiate an agreement on the nuclear issue. A realistic policy needs to be based on this unfortunate fact.

Michael Singh

The United States is approaching the Iranian election crisis with the knowledge that Khamenei will likely retain control of Iran's most troubling policies, regardless of the outcome. Nevertheless, the crisis has four national security implications for the United States.

First, the brazen way that the regime handled the voting suggests that it may be quite insecure, rather than cautious as many suppose. If so, this implies that Iran is less likely to brook any openings to the West that would accompany engagement or a potential U.S.-Iranian agreement.

Second, the reselection of Ahmadinezhad indicates that engagement with the United States is not the Iranian regime's top priority. He campaigned specifically against detente with the West, and Khamenei's own comments supported this line. These first two points underscore the need to bring pressure to bear on the regime rather than relying exclusively on engagement.

Third, the growing power of the IRGC and Iran's drift toward a military dictatorship are both reflected in this crisis. This is troubling for the United States, as the IRGC is responsible for some of Iran's most unwholesome policies. Furthermore, the mounting concentration of power in this military elite suggests that the regime may be increasingly insulated from international pressure. This suggests that the threshold for changing the regime's cost-benefit calculation is high, and American leaders will require steel nerves as they try to induce Iran's leaders to engage.

Fourth, the United States needs to tread carefully, but it must be quite clear in its support for the Iranian people. It must condemn the killing of demonstrators and demand free and fair elections without picking winners. While this may seem to run counter to U.S. efforts to engage Iran, multiple examples from U.S. history show there need not be any contradiction between standing with the people -- and their legitimate desires and aspirations for freedom -- and achieving U.S. strategic objectives with Iran.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cole Bunzel.