

Don't Discount the Iranian Election

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Jun 5, 2013

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Articles & Testimony

Khamenei's handling of the presidential election highlights his desire to prevent foreign accommodation, including on the nuclear issue.

Many commentators have dismissed the upcoming Iranian presidential election, reasoning that the Supreme Leader makes all the important political decisions anyway -- above all, those relating to the nuclear program. But the presidential election does seem to matter to Ali Khamenei -- which is precisely why it should matter to observers in the West. The election should be understood as a forum that signals the Supreme Leader's political intentions, including those concerning the nuclear issue.

Although the Supreme Leader has attempted to stay above the political fray, he has frequently found himself at odds with Iranian presidents looking to exercise their executive authority and trying to pursue policies that challenged his preferences. That was certainly true for Mohammed Khatami, who sought reform domestically and bridge-building internationally. President Ahmadinejad may not have been keen on bridge-building internationally, but he adopted a populist approach, sought to build an independent power base, and created great dissonance within the elite by making repeated accusations of corruption.

Though Ali Khamenei has wanted to reduce the fissures within the elite, he has wanted to do so on his terms. Khamenei has always been suspicious of making deals with Washington -- the West, he has argued, interprets concessions as a sign of weakness -- and he has generally valued tight control over the political elite, in service of those conservative values, over the convening of a broad consensus. Indeed, since ascending to the position of Supreme Leader, he has worked to shape a new political consensus that reflects his own philosophy of economic self-sufficiency and hostility to the United States.

During the 2009 election, Khamenei was prepared to drop all pretense of being above political infighting; he seemed to think that by intervening to assure Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory, he would guard against the reemergence of more reformist, pragmatic forces that could challenge his policy orientation more directly. Little did the Supreme

Leader suspect that, having saved the Iranian president from defeat, Ahmadinejad would then challenge him and become a source of constant tension -- and one that may not let up even after Ahmadinejad leaves the presidency.

So now Ayatollah Khamenei has decided not to leave anything to chance. With the Guidance Council having disqualified Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, no doubt reflecting the Supreme Leader's desires, Khamenei removed any possibility of the emergence of an independent candidate. If there had been any hope that Iran's presidential election might offer a pathway to different policy approaches on dealing with the United States, he has now made it clear that will not be the case. His action should be seen for what it is: a desire to prevent greater liberalization internally and accommodation externally. The next president of Iran will be obedient to him, and preferably act as his administrative deputy.

In particular, it is the exclusion of Rafsanjani, one of the founders of the Islamic Republic, that speaks volumes. Excluding Mashaei -- a protege of Ahmadinejad, who was prepared to challenge the clerical establishment and build a populist, nationalist regime -- is one thing. It probably reflects a broad consensus among the Islamic Republic's traditional establishment. But excluding Rafsanjani is something else entirely. Rafsanjani's support for those who challenged the legitimacy of the 2009 election obviously angered hard-line conservatives. But his pedigree, nonetheless, had always previously guaranteed him a place in the political elite.

The exclusion of Rafsanjani allows the Supreme Leader to avoid the uncertainty of an election in which the Iranian public again becomes energized. Clearly, the Supreme Leader wanted to avoid the kind of excitement that Rafsanjani would have stirred up had he continued making public statements, as he has over the last two years, about Iran's need to fix the economy and reduce Iran's isolation internationally (a theme he has emphasized in recent years). But the exclusion of Rafsanjani from the election is also an important signal to anyone concerned about Iran's nuclear program. If the Supreme Leader had been interested in doing a deal with the West on the Iranian nuclear program, he would have wanted Rafsanjani to be president.

I say that not because Rafsanjani would have been capable of initiating a deal on his own -- any deal he might strike would still have to be acceptable to the Supreme Leader -- but because if the Supreme Leader were interested in an agreement, he would probably want to create an image of broad acceptability of it in advance. Rather than having only his fingerprints on it, he would want to widen the circle of decision-making to share the responsibility. And he would set the stage by having someone like Rafsanjani lead a group that would make the case for reaching an understanding. Rafsanjani's pedigree as Khomeini associate and former president, with ties to the Revolutionary Guard and to the elite more generally, would all argue for him to play this role.

Rafsanjani's exclusion is not the only signal that spells trouble for a nuclear deal. Of the eight remaining approved candidates, there are four who are close to the Supreme Leader and might have credibility negotiating: Ali Akbar Velayati, a foreign policy adviser to Khamenei; Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the Mayor of Tehran and a former commander in the Revolutionary Guards; Hassan Rowhani, a cleric and former Iranian negotiator with the Europeans on the Iranian nuclear program; and Saeed Jalili, Khamenei's current representative in the nuclear talks with the P5 plus 1 -- the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany. While any of these candidates could in theory win the election, the fact that the Iranian media is lavishing attention on Jalili certainly suggests that he is Khamenei's preference, even though he has the thinnest credentials of the lot.

If Jalili does end up becoming the Iranian president, it will be hard to avoid the conclusion that the Supreme Leader has little interest in reaching an understanding with the United States on the Iranian nuclear program. Jalili, by all accounts, has consistently approached the talks with ideological fervor, complete commitment to the Supreme Leader's guidance, and readiness to talk forever without results. His campaign now is built around the theme of resistance -- so much so that he speaks not just of resistance to the "arrogant powers" internationally and by implication on the nuclear issue but also of building a "resistance economy." The latter slogan may not reassure the

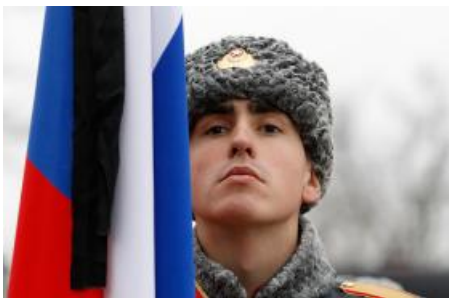
Iranian public, but it is music to the ears of Ali Khamenei.

Should Jalili become Iran's next president -- and his slavish devotion to the Supreme Leader makes him the ideal candidate for Khamenei -- we won't have to guess about Khamenei's intentions in nuclear negotiations. He will be telling us.

Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute's counselor, previously served as special assistant to President Obama and senior director for the Central Region at the National Security Council. ❖

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