

Iran's Politicians Focus on 2013 Presidential Elections, not Nuclear Issue

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Brief Analysis

The growing political struggle over the 2013 presidential elections in Iran may substantially divert the attention of the Islamic regime from external issues and hamper the progress of nuclear talks.

With back-to-back talks on the Iran nuclear issue coming up -- on March 18-19, at the technical level, in Istanbul and on April 5-6, at the deputy-ministerial level, in Almaty, Kazakhstan -- it would be easy to assume that this issue would be atop the Iranian political agenda. But Iran's leaders are instead preoccupied with the June 2013 presidential elections.

The initial view was that the election would be relatively boring. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was expected to squeeze his own candidate into the presidential chair much as he engineered the 2012 Majlis elections, which yielded Khamenei's desired results through administrative and propaganda tactics. Recent amendments to the election legislation aimed at restricting the field of potential candidates, along with plans to increase the police presence during the election, seemed to fit this scenario.

IT IS NOT TIME TO BE BORED

As it turns out, the next presidential elections in Iran will be anything but boring. The first three months of 2013 clearly demonstrated that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will not be playing by Khamenei's rules. He was supposed to spend the last six months of his second term silently preparing to leave the political scene. Instead, he suddenly demonstrated his intention to back his advisor Esfandiar Rahim Mashai to become the next president. Moreover, reports have surfaced that Ahmadinejad dreams of emulating the path of Russian president Vladimir Putin, who returned to the presidency after one term away.

Ahmadinejad has been skillfully playing the political game. He has painted his rivals as corrupt, and he sponsored a program by which Iranians would receive an assistance payment of 800,000 to 1,000,000 rials for the March 21

Nowruz (New Year), equal to \$65 to \$82 at the favorable official rate of 12,260 rials to the dollar used to determine prices for basic goods in government-regulated outlets. And he proposed raising the cash payments, which he introduced two years ago to replace phased-out subsidies, by 125 percent for the next year.

Another factor making the election more interesting is the disarray in which the camp opposing Ahmadinejad finds itself. This group, the self-proclaimed "principalists," brands its opponents on Ahmadinejad's side "deviationists." The principalists would seem to hold an overwhelming advantage in the election, including through the clear support of the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the overwhelming majority in the Majlis and Guardian Council. Nor is state-run television subtle in its support for the principalists. But Ahmadinejad's foes have been completely unable to unite on a candidate. Even if one excludes obvious outsiders (e.g., Manoucher Motaki, Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, and Parviz Fatah), the list of likely candidates from this group is extensive: Ali Akbar Velayati, Mohsen Rezaii, Gholam-Ali Hadad-Adel, Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, Saeed Jalili, and some others. They are all conservatives who are loyal to the Supreme Leader and whose vision of the political situation aligns with his. None of them could be considered an ideal candidate for the presidency in Khamenei's view, but all of them want to win. Even more important, at the moment, there is no clear front-runner: any of these major names has a relatively equal chance.

The levelness of the playing field means that the political fighting among the candidates will be fierce and all-consuming. The rhetoric will presumably include claims of differing policy stances, claims that should be viewed with skepticism. Determining the true attitude of each candidate toward the nuclear issue and U.S.-Iran rapprochement will likely be difficult, especially given the long history in Iran of challengers calling loudly for better relations with the United States only to backtrack once they come into power.

Even before the rigged 2009 presidential election, the candidates presented relatively ambiguous ideological platforms, although it was still possible to differentiate certain aspects in their doctrinal approach (e.g., regarding gradations of reformists, conservatives, technocrats, and so on). Since the demonstrations that followed the vote, the range of permissible policy viewpoints in Iran has narrowed, making this year's presidential contest one over raw power, and the money that comes with it, rather than specific ideology or policy prescriptions. And, far from reflecting a rebirth of pluralism and democracy in Iran, the long list of candidates indicates the lack of a true spectrum of views on the direction the country should take.

Absent significant policy differences, the fighting among the candidates is bound to become personal -- and this process has already begun. Thus, on February 3, Ahmadinejad accused the family of Majlis speaker Ali Larijani of abusing its access to power, backing his claim with tape-recorded evidence allegedly confirming the attempt of Larijani's brothers, Sadeq and Fazel, to bribe the ex-prosecutor of Tehran, Said Mortazavi, in exchange for so-called political support. Some Iranian observers are awaiting additional bombshells from the Ahmadinejad camp, not only on the Larijanis but also on other influential families, including that of Khamenei himself.

The last two Iranian presidential elections in which no incumbent competed produced surprising winners: the reformist Muhammad Khatami in 1997 and the hardliner Ahmadinejad in 2005. The 2013 election could also generate a surprise. This could happen especially if the principalists do not coalesce around one candidate, a scenario that could result in a runoff election, to be held one week after the first round. If such a vote pits Ahmadinejad's man Mashai against a principalist opponent, the result could be unpredictable.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THE NUCLEAR TALKS?

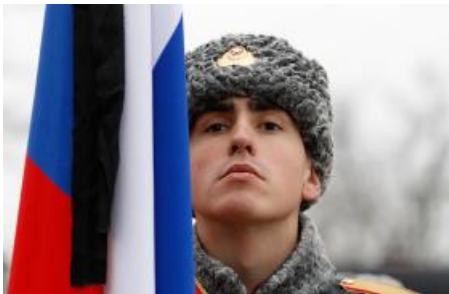
Among Iran's leaders and the public, agreement is widespread that the presidential elections are far more important than the nuclear talks. As a result, Iran's attention will be fixed on the vote. And an election winner is unlikely to resolve tensions between the so-called principalists and the deviationists. Indeed, under most scenarios,

the tensions postelection will either stay the same or worsen, with Ahmadinejad likely remaining on the political scene. For his part, Khamenei will have his hands full trying to impose unity, and presumably he will not succeed: neither he nor his predecessor as Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, could stop the incessant factional warfare that has characterized the Islamic Republic from its onset.

What this means for the nuclear talks is unclear. The only certain conclusion is that Iranian leaders at every level, including Khamenei, will be contending with difficult domestic political problems, on top of the deteriorating economic situation. They will consider any steps on the nuclear issue, in no small part, for what impact those steps have on the domestic political scene. In some scenarios, the deep factional differences will impede forging a consensus to accept a compromise with the major world powers -- the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany -- known as the P5+1. In other scenarios, the deep internal splits may lead to acceptance of a deal in order to outmaneuver the other factions. The former scenario seems much more likely, but any such forecast is based on slim information. Over the last twenty years, Iran's political scene has repeatedly surprised observers inside and outside the country, and it would be prudent to assume that the surprises will continue.

Nikolay Kozhanov is an expert at the Moscow-based Institute of the Middle East and author of the Washington Institute study Russia's Relations with Iran: Dialogue without Commitments. ❖

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