

Will Iran's Election Produce Change We Can Believe in?

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Articles & Testimony

To most Westerners, Iranian politics is essentially a black box, making it difficult to know what to hope for out of Friday's presidential elections. Knowledgeable commentators offer vastly differing opinions regarding the extent to which the results will reflect the will of the Iranian people versus that of Iran's ultimate authority, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

It is widely agreed, however, that the elections are manipulated from start -- (via the vetting of candidates) to finish (via the distortion of the results), and that whatever their outcome, true power on vital issues such as Iran's nuclear program and relations with the United States remain strictly in the hands of Khamenei. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the elections are irrelevant to U.S. interests. Their outcome, and the U.S. reaction to it, will be critical to the nuclear showdown with Iran.

The first thing that U.S. officials will be looking for from Friday's election is what their outcome reveals about prospects for U.S.-Iran engagement. The incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, despite his quixotic outreach to the United States, has heaped scorn on his predecessors for pursuing "detente" with the West and has shown disdain for international cooperation. His challengers, meanwhile, have professed a desire for better relations with the West and lambasted Ahmadinejad for leaving Iran internationally isolated and friendless. Whatever else it may reflect about Iran, an Ahmadinejad victory would mean that Iran's leaders are shaking their still-clenched fists at President Obama's outstretched hand.

While a reformist victory might pave the way for U.S.-Iran dialogue, it would by no means guarantee such an outcome. Instead, several scenarios are possible. Ahmadinejad's defeat could result in paralysis or turmoil as hardliners and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps -- which has publicly warned against a "velvet revolution" -- clash with the newly-elected government.

More troubling is the possibility that a reformist victory could lead Iran to engage in dialogue with the United States at the initiative of the new government, while continuing apace its nuclear program and support for terrorism at the direction of the Supreme Leader. This was the case during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who was courted by the West, who was the beneficiary of a series of unilateral gestures by the Clinton administration, but who made little change to Iran's most troubling policies. Nevertheless, a reformist win would likely evaporate whatever support exists for sanctions in Russia, China, and much of Europe, and spark instead a rush to Tehran for diplomatic and economic dealmaking. As a result, this outcome could paradoxically leave the Obama administration facing the bitter choice between military action and accommodation. Adding to the complexity, it is likely to take some time -- perhaps months -- to determine how the outcome of the election is affecting Iran's nuclear program and its policy toward the West.

So how should the United States proceed in the elections' aftermath?

It is vital to keep in mind that Iran's presidential elections are not about the United States. As with elections everywhere, foreign policy will be only one element of voters' decisions, and it will likely take a back seat to more

pressing economic and social issues. Thus, while the results will have consequences for the United States, Washington should not fall prey to solipsism by reading them simplistically as a referendum on bilateral relations.

In that vein, the results of the elections should not be allowed to affect U.S. policy toward Iran. We do not have the luxury of choosing our Iranian interlocutors, despite the oft-stated recommendation that we negotiate only with the Supreme Leader's staff and bypass the other organs of Iranian government. We should likewise take care not to fall into the trap of allowing Iran's own choice of interlocutor to dictate our policy. If one of Ahmadinejad's challengers is victorious, he should be given a blank slate, but the Iranian regime should not. The United States and its allies can ill afford any delay or slackening of pressure with the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran looming ever closer.

In his own pursuit of the presidency, Barack Obama campaigned on the themes of hope and change. While the challengers in Iran's presidential elections similarly inspire hope among the Iranian people, they have little ability to deliver the sort of change sought by the United States. Whatever the outcome on Friday, the U.S. message to Iran's leaders should be simple: we honor not the trappings of democracy but the free exercise of it, and we will judge you not by your words but by your actions. ❖

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