

Ahmadinezhad's Popularity One Year On

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Brief Analysis

Westerners believe Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad to be popular in Iran, in no small part because of his strong support for Iran's nuclear program. However, there is much evidence to the contrary.

There is limited information available with which to form a judgment about the popularity of any politician or political program in Iran. The government forbids any independent opinion polling on matters as ordinary as the raging problem of drug addiction, let alone sensitive issues like negotiations with the United States or the nuclear program. The main sources of information for Western media are the statements and photographs that come from Iranian state media, or other Western journalists who go to Iran but cannot work freely in the face of government controls. The Western newsmedia has taken the massive turnouts at demonstrations in support of Ahmadinezhad and his nuclear policy as evidence of popular support for both. But the size of such demonstrations has no meaning beyond illustrating the efficiency of the regime's propaganda machine. Unfortunately, Western media take this propaganda for the truth. The Iranian regime has nearly succeeded in fashioning its own image and imposing it on its critics.

Official results show Ahmadinezhad was elected by only 35 percent of eligible voters—in an election that was not free and fair, according to many top Iranian officials. Most of Ahmadinezhad's support came from rural regions and the poorer classes of Iranian society; these voters hoped that Ahmadinezhad's election would reduce corruption and raise their standard of living. Today there are clear signs of dissatisfaction within these constituencies. The evidence comes from independent journalists, blogs, and independent Iranian news websites which have reported increasing discontent with Ahmadinezhad's domestic policies.

Failed Economic Policies

Ahmadinezhad's principal campaign platform was improving economic conditions. Frequently during his campaign, Ahmadinezhad said that he wanted to bring the benefits of oil revenue to peoples' dining tables. He rarely talked about his foreign policy and did not make any remarkable statements about a nuclear program during his campaign. Now, after only one year in office, the situation has reversed. He has failed to realize his naive and idealistic economic promises, and he has turned himself into an international figure whose priorities lie in foreign diplomacy, not domestic policy.

Ahmadinezhad promised to fight corruption and expose corrupt managers to the public, but one year later not a single manager has been brought to court on corruption charges. Instead, despite promising an administration free of corruption and nepotism, Ahmadinezhad has appointed many of his own relatives to government posts.

In early July of this year, the accountability office of the Tehran municipality accused the Ahmadinezhad's older brother of corruption for the handling of a contract while Ahmadinezhad was the mayor of Teheran. Davood Ahmadinezhad is now the head of the accountability office the president's office, which supervises all government's ministries and institutes.

Masoud Zaribafan, a member of Tehran's city council who is married to the sister of Ahmadinezhad's wife, has been named cabinet secretary—an appointment that provoked protest even from conservatives. The presence of many other members of Ahmadinezhad's family in the government has made many doubt the honesty of the humble president.

With regard to economic policy, the latest objection to Ahmadinezhad comes from fifty Iranian economists, who published an open letter to the president warning about the direction of the Iranian economy. The rising the cost of living and the recent announcement that beginning in the fall, gas will be rationed, are causing ordinary Iranians to worry about the results of Ahmadinezhad's economic policy.

Farshad Momeni, a prominent Iranian economist, warned that Ahmadinezhad's economic policy follows that of Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1970s. During that time, the price of oil rose sharply and despite expert opinion, Shah personally interfered and injected the oil income into the national economy in order to accelerate the movement toward "the great civilization." Momeni warns that using the current oil income without wise economic planning will have terrible consequences and that a decline in oil prices would be disastrous for the national economy.

Ahmadinezhad responded to the economists by attacking them, saying they were lying. According to the president, the inflation rate fell to 2.7 percent last year. The Iranian economy minister backs up Ahmadinezhad, saying that prices are not rising in Iran.

Criticism of Ahmadinezhad does not come only from people outside the regime; parliament has refused many of his main proposals. The first legislation Ahmadinezhad presented parliament would have created the Mehr Reza Fund, a pool of money to be used for small-scale individual subsidies to help people pay for such things as weddings and mortgages. The proposal died last month when parliament took the fund off its agenda. Iranian economists believe that such primitive subsidy schemes will lead to runaway inflation without reducing poverty. Some believe that the fund is not designed for charity, but rather, as a tool for Ahmadinezhad's political exploitation in coming parliamentary and presidential elections. Despite the widespread criticism from conservative parliamentarians that led lawmakers to refuse their assent for the fund's creation, Ahmadinezhad has illegally approved this project himself through the Supreme Council of Administration.

Political Problems

Ahmadinezhad makes problems for himself with his public statements. One of his latest outbursts came as the national soccer team prepared to depart for the World Cup in Germany. Sport fans throughout the country watched Ahmadinezhad tell the players, "Football is a very easy game, because you can kick the ball from forty meters and send it to the goal. We are behind you." The statement showed his naivete, extending even to the game of soccer. After the Iranian team failed to advance beyond the tournament's first round, Ahmadinezhad's administration was criticized for an inefficient and unprofessional sport policy.

Although Ahmadinezhad allocated a hefty portion of his budget to religious institutions last year in order to attract clerical support, the radical positions of Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a prominent religious supporter, have

hurt the president's popularity. Last month, the government's clerical establishments were nearly unanimous in condemning Mesbah Yazdi's indirect effort of to prevent Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential head of the Expediency Council, from delivering a public speech in Ghom. Clerics associated with Mesbah Yazdi's institute shouted Rafsanjani down from the podium. The Special Court of the Clerics in Ghom sentenced the clerics who insulted Rafsanjani to prison and other punishments.

Mesbah Yazdi will not allow his candidates for the Assembly of Experts, due to be elected soon, to run on the same list as Rafsanjani. That is a problem for two prominent state clerical institutes, the Association of Militant Clerics of Tehran and the Association of Mentors of the Ghom Seminary, which, though they dislike Mesbah Yazdi, might be willing to include him and his associates on a consensus list if one could be formed including them as well as Rafsanjani and other people close to him. Despite Ahmadinezhad's attempt to attract clerical support by increasing their budget, a visible gap is opening between the president and the clerical establishment.

Implications for the Nuclear Program

Many people in Iran link the current nuclear policy with multiple aspects of domestic mismanagement. For ordinary people, especially those who voted for Ahmadinezhad, the price of tomatoes is more important than the achievements of Iranian nuclear engineers. Ahmadinezhad's declining support seems likely, then, to have a significant negative effect on the popularity of the nuclear program among Iranians.

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