

The New Iranian Government: Resurrecting Past Errors

by [Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

Jul 15, 2005

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute where he will focus on the prospects for political change in Iran and the role of the international community in the movement for democracy in Iran.

In the late 1970s, as an undergraduate at Sharif University of Technology in Iran



Brief Analysis

On June 29, 2005, Iran's Guardian Council confirmed Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad as winner of the June 24 presidential election, as dictated by Iran's constitution and in accordance with the wishes of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He will take office on August 4. The fact that Ahmadinezhad won the election would have meant nothing unless Khamenei approved the results. While the president is titular head of the Iranian government, he is at most second-in-command after the Supreme Leader. In order to understand how the Ahmadinezhad presidency will unfold, then, one must first realize that Khamenei will now have even more direct powers than before.

Increased Direct Rule by the Supreme Leader

Khamenei already commands vast influence over the three main branches of the Iranian government. The judicial branch is directly under his supervision; he has full power to appoint or remove any of its personnel. In fact, several such personnel (e.g., Tehran prosecutor Saed Mortazavi) are willing to do whatever he wishes. Khamenei also controls the Majlis. He brazenly demonstrated this fact during the 2004 parliamentary elections, when he barred 3,000 candidates from running, placed his own representatives in the Majlis, and appointed his son's father-in-law (Ali Haddad) as speaker. Moreover, all Majlis decisions must be approved by the Guardian Council—an appointed body—allowing Khamenei to control the passage of every law. Many other elements of the state have long been under his direct command as well, including the military, the police, the intelligence services, and the exclusive state-owned radio and television. By appointing Ahmadinezhad as president, Khamenei can now interfere in even the smallest details of the executive branch.

To be sure, the Supreme Leader has always been able to interfere in most any matter. In the past, however, the public would not necessarily know when he did so, allowing him to blame others for his decisions. Now, the authority structure inherent in the Iranian constitution has been made clear: more than 80 percent of the government's powers are in the hands of the Supreme Leader, and he is not accountable to anyone. Fifteen years ago, at the beginning of Khamenei's tenure, I wrote a private letter to him stating that if he continued down the path he was pursuing, we would reach a point where the nation was standing on one side and he on the other. That day has arrived. Very soon it will become obvious that he cannot solve the country's problems, and then the nation will confront him.

Historically, the regime's base of power rested on the bazaar merchants and the clergy. Beginning eight years ago, however, the armed forces began to enter the political arena under Khamenei's direction. The presidency of Ahmadinezhad, who hails from the Revolutionary Guards, marks the beginning of a period in which the regime's power base will clearly be the intelligence services and the armed forces, especially the Revolutionary Guards. In the 1960s, the shah gravitated toward militarism, believing that he could govern the country by relying on his military and secret service (known as SAVAK). When oil revenues increased, he believed that the world was going his way—that he had trampled all of his opponents and could easily run the country by himself. Khamenei is following the same path.

The New Government's Policies: Resurrecting Past Errors

The Iranian regime seems bent on repeating the classic mistakes of other revolutions with regard to executive and economic policies. Ahmadinezhad is poised to return to the policies of former prime minister Mir-Hussein Musavi's government (1980–1989), often referred to as Iran's First Republic. This would hold some attraction for parts of Iranian society. The First Republic, or the Republic of the Revolution and War, comprised the period of revolutionary victory and the Iran-Iraq War, lasting until the 1989 death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. During that period, all of the revolution's theories were put into effect. One result of this was a sharp decrease in the country's per capita income, from \$4,000 to \$1,500 per year. This was not coincidental; the revolution's economic and executive policies were by their very nature doomed to failure.

During the Second Republic—the period under the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), known as the Republic of Terror—the necessity for economic reform became obvious. Lack of attention to political, cultural, and social reforms, however, made the regime's economic efforts a failure. At the time, the government understood that, in order to increase investment, it needed to make peace with the world and strengthen the private sector. Yet, the regime did not understand that it needed democracy and human rights in order to accomplish the latter two goals—that it could not pursue such goals while at the same time attempting to stabilize its rule by persecuting opponents and committing more than 300 acts of terrorism inside and outside the country.

The Third Republic, the Republic of Reforms, lasted from May 1997 to July 2005, under the presidency of Muhammad Khatami. However much it may have sought to enact political, social, and cultural reforms and redress the shortcomings of the Second Republic, it failed to acknowledge that such reforms are impossible within the framework of the current constitution. Accordingly, the economic situation remained stagnant, and the problems of democracy and human rights were not resolved. The Third Republic's failure came to a head with the 2004 Majlis elections and the June 2005 presidential election, which spelled its end.

Both Khamenei and Ahmadinezhad seem to believe that they can solve Iran's problems by returning to the policies of the First Republic. In doing so, they ignore the historical fact that movement within the Islamic Republic and Iranian society has naturally arisen from the failure of each of the above phases. Therefore, the more they return to the First Republic's theories, the more profoundly they will fail. Specifically, by pursuing such policies, they will bring the country to the brink of two abysses:

1. Greater reliance on oil income. Iran's oil income has increased lately, but depending on such income will only add to the country's economic vertigo. Such was the case in 2004, when the newly elected Majlis used increased oil revenues to inject \$7 billion into the economy. Not only did this action fail to solve any of Iran's problems, it also left behind a 25 percent inflation rate. Similar measures in the future would only increase unemployment, inflation, and corruption.
2. Greater persecution of regime opponents. Some analysts believe that dictators can survive by trampling their opponents in a systematic and continuous manner. Yet, such oppression requires a regime along the extreme lines

of Saddam Hussein's, which is not within Khamenei's power at the moment. It also requires a society that is incongruent with the current makeup and mindset of the Iranian public. For example, the current regime could not completely trample social freedoms, especially in the case of women. Most important, such a regime could not exist in the current international climate. The world in general, particularly the Middle East, has entered a phase in which it will not tolerate a regime of this sort.

In light of these factors, Ahmadinezhad's regime and Khamenei's regressive imagination will constitute only a transitional period, helping give birth to a new structure for the Iranian government, one driven by the mobilization of the people. A Fourth Republic is on its way—one that eschews the form of the present Islamic Republic for the simple reason that it cannot exist within the framework of the existing constitution.

Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #1013

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)