

Iran:

Toward a Fourth Republic?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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



Brief Analysis

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has gone through three distinct political stages. The first stage, which began with the victory of the revolution and ended with the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was a period in which the revolutionary regime was established and consolidated. This stage, which also witnessed an eight-year war with Iraq, may be referred to as the Republic of Revolution and War. The second stage, known as the Republic of Terror, correlated with the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This period saw increasing popular dissatisfaction with the regime that led, in turn, to the "silent revolution" that brought Mohammad Khatami to the presidency in 1997. As Khatami's second term draws to a close, the third stage in Iran's post-revolutionary development -- the Republic of Reform -- is also coming to an end. The reform movement has been defeated. The upcoming presidential elections in Iran may thus signal a new stage in Iran's political evolution, with important implications for Iran's domestic political situation as well as U.S. policy toward Tehran.

Upcoming Presidential Elections

Iran's presidential elections, scheduled for June 17, will see eight candidates vie to succeed Khatami as president of the Islamic Republic. The leading reformist candidate, Mostafa Moin, faces a difficult challenge in that he must persuade the people of Iran to relive the Khatami era in attempting to expand the powers of the country's elected officials relative to its unelected rulers. To succeed, Moin will have to bring out Iran's voters in large numbers, as Khatami did when he was swept into office in 1997. That is an unlikely scenario.

The leading contender, former president Rafsanjani, also faces challenges in his bid to return to the office he occupied from 1989 to 1997. Iranians are fond of conspiracy theories, particularly of the idea that there is one central figure behind the scene pulling all of the strings. Many Iranians think Rafsanjani is that figure, to the possible detriment of his candidacy. Furthermore, Rafsanjani's relationship with Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, remains unclear. Though they support one another publicly, many feel that Khamenei would prefer someone whom he could more easily manage. Any tensions between the two personalities would extend to their respective factions; many in the security forces and Revolutionary Guard that Khamenei controls blame the country's troubles on Rafsanjani's corruption and mismanagement.

Whichever candidate wins the presidential election, Iranian government policies on matters of strategic importance are unlikely to see any major changes. Strategic issues like the country's nuclear program and its relations with the United States fall squarely under the purview of the supreme leader.

The Significance of Electoral Turnout

The Iranian government currently anticipates more than 40 percent participation in the presidential elections, and it will likely raise its projections as June 17 approaches. Indeed, Supreme Leader Khamenei has in recent weeks repeatedly stressed the importance of a high turnout and urged Iranians to go to the polls. However, unpublished polls have forecast turnout of less than 30 percent. This may well be the case, given the trend of decline in voter participation in Iran's elections. For instance, whereas 83 percent of eligible Iranians voted in the 1997 elections that brought Khatami to power, in the 2001 elections, perhaps as a result of disillusionment over the ineffective political process, turnout dropped to 67 percent.

The turnout on election day will consequently serve as a barometer for those who are calling for a referendum on the Iranian constitution. It will indicate how quickly the people of Iran can be mobilized in favor of the concept of a referendum. The pro-referendum opposition includes groups within Iran, such as the University Students' Office of Consolidation, and members of the Iranian opposition based abroad. If participation on June 17 is low -- anywhere between 20 and 30 percent -- pressure on the regime will increase and progress toward the next stage in Iran's political development will accelerate. A higher turnout would indicate slower, albeit still certain, progress toward political change in Iran.

Implications for U.S. Policy

When President Khatami was elected eight years ago, he ran on a platform of democracy, human rights, civil society, and engagement with the international community. The failure of reform since 1997 has led to a political depression in Iran. Iranians need a renewed sense of hope. In this respect, the West has an important, even crucial, role to play. For the first time, Iranians are looking abroad for assistance. Specifically, the United States can do three things to signal its support for the promotion of democracy in Iran:

1. The U.S. government could announce that it will not recognize the results of the June 17 elections or any future elections held under the current Iranian constitution, because any contest organized under its terms is certain to be neither free nor fair.
2. The United States could put the spotlight on the human rights situation in Iran. This can be accomplished by, for example, supporting the government of Canada in its investigation of the death of Iranian-Canadian journalist Zahra Kazemi and calling for a trial for Saeed Mortazavi, the Tehran prosecutor responsible for her murder. He is responsible for the closing of more than one hundred journals and the imprisonment of several journalists and politicians.
3. The United States could focus on Iran's role in sponsoring terrorism, which has blackened the name of the Iranian people as well as those officials within the regime who genuinely strive to serve their country. The United States could, for example, launch an international investigation into the regime's support of terrorism against Iranians and foreigners, which would serve to inform the Iranian public of the regime's abhorrent policies while concurrently showing the rest of the world that those policies are in no way indicative of the attitudes of the Iranian people.

These policies, if implemented, would serve to convince ordinary Iranians that the United States is genuinely interested in promoting democracy in their country, and that there will be no deals behind the curtain with the current regime. (The Iranian government is trying to convince Iranians that commercial interests will force the United States to strike secret deals with the current regime, as some Western government have already done.) None of these proposals involves financial assistance, which is not necessary and could in fact be harmful to those advocating political change in Iran. As Iran stands at a political crossroads, America's words and actions -- not its

money -- can best serve the cause of freedom and democracy.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Naysan Rafati.

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