Iran Uses Presidential Campaign to Advance Its Nuclear Program

by Patrick Clawson **(/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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Brief Analysis

Iran appears to be fomenting a crisis over its nuclear program as the campaign for the June 17 presidential elections gets underway (by May 14, candidates have to register; by May 24, the Guardian Council will announce which candidates are approved).

Assertiveness on the Nuclear Program

Ever since Iran signed an October 2003 agreement with the Europeans to freeze its nuclear program, Tehran has been pushing the envelope with a series of small steps, none large enough to scuttle the deal. For instance, it has continued fast-pace construction of a heavy-water plant with no known civilian uses. During a November 2004 crisis, Iran converted 37 tons of uranium oxide (U3O8, or yellowcake) into uranium tetraflouride (UF4)—the intermediary step for making uranium hexaflouride (UF6), which is the feedstock for centrifuges. Judging that the West did not react vigorously to such small steps, Iran has hinted broadly that it will begin taking larger ones. Specifically, Iran has warned that it wants to convert the 37 tons of UF4 into UF6.

The reasons behind recent Iranian assertiveness are unclear. Tehran may assume that the West would be reluctant to provoke a crisis during the Iranian presidential campaign, since such a move could help the hardline candidates. This possibility contrasts with the widely held expectation (including by this author) that Iran will spend the spring preoccupied with the presidential election; in this latter scenario, the nuclear issue would not come to a head until later in the year.

There have also been longstanding suspicions that Iran suspends its nuclear activities when its scientists hit a technical barrier; once the problem is resolved, the program is unfrozen until a new problem arises. Some suspect, for example, that Iranian complicity in freezing its centrifuge program in October 2003 was directly related to a technical problem of linking together individual centrifuges into a "cascade" of up to 164 units, which is the only practical way to enrich uranium. When its facility in Esfahan was ready to produce UF6 in October 2004, Iran terminated the October 2003 freeze and began to operate that facility. Then, once Iran realized that only the first part of the process (from U3O8 to UF4) worked well, Iran agreed to renew the freeze. Perhaps Iran now thinks it can achieve the second part of the process (the UF4-to-UF6 conversion).

At the same time, there are accumulating indications that Iran may have a clandestine, parallel centrifuge program. One easy-to-explain indicator has been Iran's proposal to the Europeans that it be allowed to produce UF6, which could then be sent abroad for centrifuging into reactor fuel. From an economic or political point of view, this proposal makes no sense: why would Iran spend billions of dollars and much prestige to develop centrifuges, only to yield them while maintaining a lower-profile UF6 plant? One explanation is that UF6 is produced in a large plant that is difficult to keep clandestine, whereas centrifuging can be accomplished in small facilities that are easier to conceal (even a 164-unit cascade can be produced in a building no larger than a typical U.S. home). In other words, Iran is proposing that it be allowed to keep the one link in the nuclear chain that would otherwise be most vulnerable to military strikes.

Presidential Elections

While Tehran may hope that the West does not want to provoke a crisis during the Iranian election campaign, in fact the West has little reason to concern itself with who is elected president. The Muhammad Khatami years have exposed the weakness of the Iranian presidency, and the Guardian Council has made clear that it will only approve candidates if they agree to the continued empowerment of the Supreme Leader to make all important decisions—including on issues concerning the nuclear program.

One of the main contenders in this election is Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as president from 1989 to 1997 (the Iranian constitution barred him from running for a third successive four-year term). Despite hopes that he may strike a deal with the West if elected, his record as president included stepping up terror outside Iran—such as attacking Iranian dissidents abroad and bombing the U.S. barracks at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia—despite implementing some reform at home. Rafsanjani has also experienced a difficult relationship with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for the last twenty years. Even if Khamenei wanted to normalize relations with the West—and there is little evidence that he is desirous of any ties other than economic—he has no wish to see Rafsanjani receive credit for what would be a very popular step. Meanwhile, illustrating the limited nature of Iranian reform, Rafsanjani is drawing much support from reformers who are pessimistic about the prospects of the only reform candidate, former minister Mostafa Moin. (When Rafsanjani last went before voters in the 1999 parliamentary elections, he was humiliated by reformists, who saw him as a corrupt figure of the past.)

Rafsanjani's main opposition is the self-described "principled" camp, more hardline than himself. This camp made a vain attempt to coalesce around one figure, but few of its candidates have withdrawn from the race despite a prior agreement that only the one highest in the polls would run. The most important hardline candidate is Ali Larijani, who could receive more votes than Rafsanjani if turnout is low (Larijani's voters are dedicated; Rafsanjani's are not). But there are several other hardline candidates likely to be approved by the Guardian Council: police chief Mohammed Baqer Qalibaf, ex-Revolutionary Guard commander Mohsen Rezai, and Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. It is a distinct possibility that no one will achieve a majority of the vote on June 17, requiring a runoff between the top two vote-getters on July 1.

The main difference between Rafsanjani and the "principled" camp is generational. In almost any country that goes through a major war, the war generation eventually comes to power, and this trend now seems to be taking place in Iran. Nearly all of the important political figures to date—reformers and hardliners alike—came from the 1979 revolutionary generation. By contrast, many of the hardliners elected to the Majlis last year were new political faces from the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war generation (to which the rest of the candidates openly appeal). This war generation may pose problems for the West. Perhaps most worrisome, they apparently support an increasingly assertive role for the military and the Revolutionary Guards on sensitive decisions. This trend was evident during a just-ended yearlong struggle in which the military and Revolutionary Guards publicly forced the civilian government to accept their position on who would run the new Tehran airport (and therefore control the profitable smuggling route). The

war generation's support for this kind of assertiveness is particularly troubling since the military and the Guards have also taken over parts of the nuclear program.

In general, the war generation has had less experience with the outside world than has the revolutionary generation (many of whom studied abroad), and it is disinterested in the globalization that excites the younger "Khatami" generation. Its formative experience was a near-decade-long war fought while the world community either did little to help or actively assisted its enemy, Iraq (despite the latter's blatant aggression and use of chemical weapons). But the war generation can also be a practical group, prepared to compromise when its objectives cannot be achieved.

In the end, no matter who wins Iran's presidential election, the Supreme Leader still calls the shots. Indeed, who gets elected is less important than voter turnout; turnout is an indicator of regime support, as those who do not vote can be viewed as rejecting the system altogether. Many democratically minded Iranians are calling for a boycott of the elections, arguing that no change can come from within the framework of the existing constitution, and that the only vote should be a referendum on a forming a new constitution. As a result, the regime will take great pains to produce a credible turnout among Iran's 48 million eligible voters. The pattern of recent elections suggests that real turnout will be much lower than government figures indicate. It is possible that less than 15 million will vote, compared to the 30 million who took part in the 1997 election (20 million of whom voted for Khatami).

Prospects

Many in the West hoped that Khatami's victory in 1997 was a sign that the Islamic Republic had begun a process of evolution. Instead, a veritable regime change has taken place in Iran during the Khatami years. Indeed, power has shifted from technocrats who agonized about reforming the system, to hardliners ignorant of how to run the country and ill-informed about the world.

Consider the economy. After years of talking about reform, the Iranian government has returned to the most revolutionary policies of the past. For example, instead of welcoming foreign investment during the last year, the Majlis cancelled a Turkish cellphone project and harassed Renault's billion dollar automobile plant project. Instead of saving oil windfalls in the Exchange Reserve Fund, the Majlis ordered at least $7 billion dollars to be taken from the fund this year. Instead of using the windfall revenue to create new jobs, the Majlis increased subsidies, including $2 billion on bread, $4 billion on imported gasoline, and at least $4 billion on locally produced energy. With inflation raging, the Majlis also ordered price controls on many products, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

Although to date, hardliners have most actively restored old revolutionary policies in the area of economics and other domestic issues, Iran's current offensive on its nuclear program suggests that foreign and security policy may be falling under their ill-informed, ill-considered influence. If so, expect a crisis over Iran's nuclear activities sooner rather than later. Only a clear message and strong actions will get hardliner attention. A striking example is the tough letter sent this week to Iran by the British, French, and German foreign ministers, warning that restarting the UF6 plant "would bring the negotiating process to an end." British prime minister Tony Blair added, "We certainly will support referral to the United Nations Security Council [which the United States has long wanted] if Iran breaches its obligations and undertakings." In response, Iran backpedaled on its plans to inform the International Atomic Energy Agency that the UF6 plant would be restarted. The lesson from this episode should be that a strong, unified transatlantic stance precipitates Iranian reassessment.

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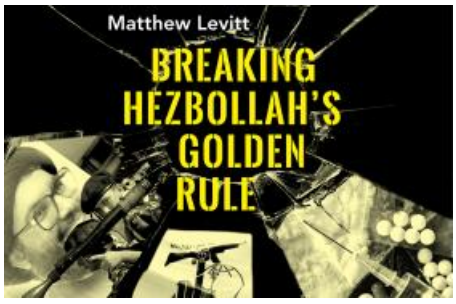

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