Do Iran's Presidential Elections Matter?

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

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Brief Analysis

Today's decision by Iranian president Mohammad Khatami to run for re-election was more important than the actual election on June 8, which he is sure to win. But neither matters nearly as much as the crucial question for Iran's future namely, will hardliners let the formal government rule or will they continue their crackdown through the revolutionary institutions they control? The answer will be key for U.S. policy options towards Iran.

Khatami Will be Re-elected, But PowerlessOver 150 candidates have filed to run against Khatami, although few are likely to survive the vetting by the hardline Guardian Council; in 1997, 238 applied and 4 were approved. It is not clear if the self-proclaimed hardline Consensus and Unity Group of twenty-eight associations will coalesce around one of the candidates, such as ex-intelligence minister Ali Fallahian who is wanted in Germany for a terrorist murder.

It might seem that Khatami's re-election serves the interests of hardliners, since he gives hope to people who might otherwise turn to protest, while at the same time he does little to slow the hardline crackdown a crackdown that in the last year has shut forty newspapers and in the last month has incarcerated seventy reform politicians. But in fact the hardliners are unenthusiastic about Khatami. In an April 26 open letter, former Revolutionary Guard commander Mohsen Rezai wrote that Khatami "would be well advised to retire in order to preserve his good image" (Rezai is the key aide of former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a power-broker, and a hardliner, but by no means a fanatic). But an effort to block Khatami's election is unlikely, given his popularity; indeed, Khatami went to see Rezai the day after the open letter, presumably to seal a deal about the election.

The most likely outcome for the June 8 election is Khatami's re-election, in a turnout much more modest than 1997's 88 percent participation. A similar pattern has been the case with Iran's last two presidents: Ali Khamenei, elected in 1981 and re-elected in 1985; and Rafsanjani, elected in 1989 and re-elected in 1993.

One reason for Khatami's declining popularity is that he has no coherent program for addressing Iran's pressing socioeconomic issues. Khatami rarely speaks about, much less makes proposals to address, economic matters. Meanwhile, as a byproduct of the population boom after the 1979 revolution, at least 700,000 Iranians are entering the job market each year, in a country that in the last decade created at most 300,000 jobs a year. It would seem as though 2001 would be a banner year for Iran's economy, thanks to the high oil prices of the last two years which have allowed Iran to repay most of its foreign debt and to accumulate about $13 billion in foreign exchange reserves, but

in fact the Khatami government has done little to take advantage of the opportunities presented by these trends. And the indications about its priorities are not good: by far the largest commitment it has made for use of foreign exchange was the March agreement to buy $7 billion in Russian arms.

Change will eventually come to Iran, but how? Four years ago with Khatami's surprise victory, reform seemed inevitable and violence unthinkable. Two years ago when young rioters filled the streets of Tehran, observers wondered if there could be violence on the road to change. Today, Majlis [parliament] members warn that blocking reform leaves violence as the only alternative. There is a trend here, and it will probably continue. The dynamic in Iran is that hardliners become increasingly repressive, while young people insist on change. That is not a recipe for stability. Today, the mood seems to be one of increasing desperation; for example, Minister of Science Mostafa Mo'in estimated this week that 220,000 of Iran's academic and industrial elite emigrated in the last year. Meanwhile, the hardliners are (inadvertently, one assumes) creating the conditions for another revolution: closing one after another of the relief valves for expressing discontent, creating a new generation of national leaders with highly publicized trials of liberal journalists and politicians, and provoking students into creating national networks to plan protests.

Implications for U.S. PolicyWhen Iran's reformers were doing well, policymakers in Washington opposed to a tough U.S. line on Iran's destabilizing foreign policy actions argued that the United States should end its sanctions so as to strengthen Iran's reformers. Now that the reformers are doing poorly, the argument is heard that the U.S. government should not make its Iran policy contingent on domestic Iranian developments, but should instead lift sanctions as a way to encourage diplomatic dialogue. Both arguments are unsound.

Victory by the reformers is in the United States' interest, if for no other reason than that the hardliners have made opposition to U.S. influence a centerpiece of their policies. At the same time, there is little the U.S. government can do to help the reformers and much it can do to hurt them: too close an embrace would fan hardline suspicions that the reformers are front-men for Washington. Better to stick to proclaiming the basic principle of support for liberal democracy: applaud the limited steps Iran has taken (allowing formal elections) and urge more substantial ones (opening the election to all rather than just supporters of the current theocracy, and making the elections count by vesting real power in the formal government rather than in the revolutionary institutions and vigilantes). When the reformers are making advances, symbolic measures such as the very limited relaxation of sanctions in 1999 and 2000 can signal U.S. goodwill and interest in normal diplomatic dialogue. When the hardliners crack down, the appropriate response is to suspend initiatives; witness the European Union foreign ministers' April 2001 decision to set aside the commission's proposals for strengthening ties with Iran. At the same time, it would be appropriate for the United States to reach out more to the Iranian people while maintaining or stepping up pressure on its government. For example, the United States could end the practice of requiring the fingerprinting of ordinary Iranian visitors to the United States, while at the same time blocking travel throughout America of Iranian government officials as long as Iran continues to refuse visas to most U.S. applicants.

At the same time, the U.S. government should have no illusions that the reformers share Washington's perspectives. It was the reform-controlled Majlis which convened last week's conference on anti-peace-process terrorists under the chairmanship of the reformers' Majlis caucus chief (Ali Akbar Mohtashemi), who called for Israel's elimination; Khatami, in his speech, repeated his familiar strident denunciations of Zionism and descriptions of Israel as illegitimate. Similarly on the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles, the reformers appear as committed as the hardliners to ignoring Iran's obligations under arms control treaties it has signed: none have complained about Iran denying its production of chemical weapons while loudly claiming to be compliant with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

So the appropriate U.S. stance is to continue its pressure on Tehran so long as Iran continues to sponsor terrorism and ignore arms control commitments. The immediate issue is the future of the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act

(ILSA), which expires on August 5 unless it is renewed by Congress. While initially denying that ILSA would have much impact, Iran and international oil analysts now agree that it has, in fact, significantly impeded investment in Iran's oil and gas industry, which is exactly its stated purpose. This development has reduced the Iranian government's income, thereby slowing its arms acquisitions plans. Were ILSA to lapse, the Iranian government would conclude that, as it has long hoped, the United States as well as Europe puts commercial interests ahead of national security, allowing normal business relations to proceed irrespective of support for terrorism and WMD proliferation. Ideally, ILSA should have been renewed before the June 8 Iranian election rather than immediately after, but Congress has had too much to do during the start-up of a new administration; so the second-best option is to create as long of a gap as possible between the election and the renewal, that is, to renew just before the August 5 lapse.

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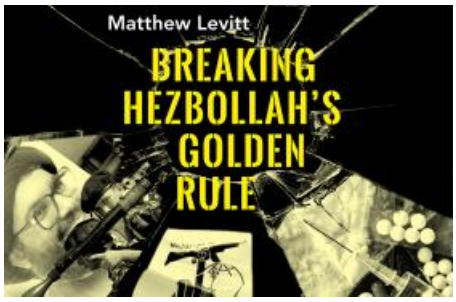

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