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The Iranian Elections: Politics of the Supreme Leader vs. Power of the President

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On June 10, 2009, Ali Alfoneh, Meir Javedanfar, Mehdi Khalaji, and Patrick Clawson addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss what to expect from Iran's June 12 presidential election. Ali Alfoneh is a visiting research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Meir Javedanfar is a Middle East analyst and director of the Middle East Economic and Political Analysis Company, Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, and Patrick Clawson is The Washington Institute's deputy director for research. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Ali Alfoneh

Power is changing hands in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the future, Iran may no longer be considered a theocracy, but a military dictatorship with Islam as its central ideology. Political changes in the recent years reveal the increasing influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Iran's political scene lacks strong and serious political parties, while the connections between the military and government are growing. With the support of Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the IRGC and its associated Basij paramilitary are independent and unchallenged. The IRGC is filling the power vacuum by acting as Iran's single political party. More than half of President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's cabinet members are former IRGC officers; about half of the parliament members and an increasing number of general governors are also former IRGC officers. For every public post a former Revolutionary Guard officer wins, a cleric loses.

The IRGC has strong influence on deciding foreign policy. Both former and current commanders of the IRGC embrace Ahmadinezhad's candidacy and his foreign policy. The IRGC is the source of support for organizations like Hamas and Hizballah. A victory for President Ahmadinezhad would affirm the power of the IRGC and ensure a continuation of current stances on foreign policy and the nuclear program.

Strong civilian institutions of liberal democracies restrict military intervention in the political process. But in Iran, civil institutions are too weak to restrict the military power. Civilian leadership also increases the military's influence by willingly using it to crack down on opponents. What will happen the day that Ayatollah Khamenei can no longer hold power? Which Iranian civilian institution will be able to prevent military infiltration of all centers of power?

Meir Javedanfar

Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's most powerful leader, governs with some degree of popular consensus, allows him to maintain stability and power in Iran. The winner of the June 12 election, however, may also reflect the people's will and serve as a political indicator for change. The new president will have the ability to affect Iran's politics directly and indirectly.

The engine of Iran's political system does not run on "Death to America" or denials of the Holocaust. Social and economic policies, which are among the most important issues in the current election, affect the stability and survival of Iran's political machine. Although the president follows the will of the leader, the president has the power to set social and economic policies.

The president can gain lobbying power by determining who sits on Iran's Supreme National Security Council. This eighteen-member body supplies policy recommendations for the leader to accept or reject. The new president's political stances could affect Iran's foreign policy and the nuclear program in the coming years. With some candidates supporting confidence-building measures with the West, Iran's policy toward the United States could change directions. Iran will most likely continue pursuing its nuclear ambitions regardless of who is elected, but its cooperation and willingness to deal with the West may change. President Obama will need to be ready to welcome a change in Iran's bearings. He must reach out the people of Iran and pressure the corrupt forces in Iran such as IRGC.

Mehdi Khalaji

The result of the election -- whatever it is -- will not surprise Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's top leader. Whether Ahmadinezhad is reelected or Mir Hossein Moussavi wins, Khamenei will maintain his position as the highest decisionmaker in Iran's political system. After twenty years of his leadership, the country is increasingly run from the office of the leader and not the office of the president. In unprecedented television debates, all four candidates strongly criticized each other, ultimately reinforcing the position of the leader and weakening the institution of the presidency.

This election reveals a deep-rooted power struggle between Khamenei and members of his own generation who do not owe their political credentials to him. Since his ascent to power twenty years ago, Khamenei has encountered difficulties working with the veterans of the Islamic Revolution as well as Iran's prominent clerics. Therefore, he has created a new generation of politicians with whom he is more comfortable. A recent sign of this power struggle was Ahmadinezhad's attack on Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in his recent television debate with reformist candidate Moussavi, in which he accused Rafsanjani and his sons of massive economic corruption. In an open letter to the leader, Rafsanjani asked Khamenei to condemn Ahmadinezhad for these accusations. But the very fact that Rafsanjani felt compelled to send an open letter rather than conveying his displeasure privately shows that his relationship with Khamenei is deteriorating. The leader's silence in response to Rafsanjani's letter has been perceived as another sign of Khamenei's willingness to marginalize his contemporaries and deprive them of power.

Khamenei seems to be self-confident and strong enough to respond to the mass mobilization in favor of two reformist candidates and against Ahmadinezhad. Furthermore, there is significant evidence that he will not flinch from using violence against potential anti-Ahmadinezhad protestors.

Patrick Clawson

Although Khamenei has taken a stance on Iran's foreign policy and the nuclear program, his positions may change. History has shown that Iran has adapted to different political situations in the past. For eight years, Iran's revered revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, suggested that the core objective of the revolution was the war with Iraq; he would not even allow public discussion of ending the war. Khomeini, however, ultimately agreed to a ceasefire. In the past, the current leader also agreed to a suspension of Iran's nuclear program. It is possible that Iran's current regime may change direction in order to ensure the survival and stability of its power. How much ability the Obama administration may have to influence such a change, however, is unclear.