

COMMENTARY

The Election: Iran as Usual?

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No one should discount the importance of the Iranian election. If nothing else, it showed that even a rigged election, where a handful of candidates chosen and approved by the Supreme Leader and his supporters were allowed to run, could still expose serious opposition to the more extreme actions of the Iranian government. While the true results of the election may never be clear, the vote at least showed that much of Iran's educated elite, its better educated youth, and many Iranian businessmen and technocrats want an Iran that is more pragmatic in conducting foreign affairs, more realistic in managing its economy, and which has better relations with the United States and the outside world.

That said, we might never know how large this class of Iranians really is. It is far too easy to discount Ahmadinejad's popularity among Iran's poor and more religious citizens and to describe his populist rhetoric as unbalanced and irrational. The fact is that Ahmadinejad skillfully exploits the same kind of politics as many other third world leaders, and this may well include the majority of Iranians. Americans that remember Huey Long and George Wallace, or who paid attention to Israel's more extreme voices in its recent election, should also realize that similar extreme voices and forms of populism are scarcely unknown in the West.

It is equally important to realize that the election was to some extent a political struggle between the more traditional political figures in the Iranian leadership like Rafsanjani and Mousavi and a newer generation led by Ahmadinejad. It is unclear that Iranian public opinion could ever have been mobilized to the same degree if this power struggle among Iran's leaders had not taken place. It is also important to remember that roughly the same cast—at least in the case of Rafsanjani—was decisively defeated in the last presidential election. While this election may well have been rigged in some ways, it is unclear that it was rigged in ways that deprived Mousavi of a majority. Although some opinion polls showed Mousavi as winning, the sampling and methods in those polls are scarcely transparent, and they do not seem to have covered much of Iran.

It also is unclear how much of a difference a Mousavi victory would really have made. There are many cases when former hard-liners become real moderates over time and then grow in office. There are also many cases where they do not. It is at least possible that Mousavi would simply have put a more moderate and politically realistic and acceptable face on Iran's presidency. Iran might also have partially liberalized its social policies as it did under President Khatami, but it is important to realize that this would weaken opposition to the regime. It might have adopted more realistic economic policies, but this would both weaken opposition and strengthen the regime. In short, it is unfair to call Mousavi a "kinder and gentler" extremist, but it is unrealistic to deny that this was a possibility or to forget how ineffective President Khatami was in spite of being a real "moderate" by Iranian standards.

In any case, outside observers need to remember that Iran not only does not have open elections—only those who support the regime and supreme leader are allowed to run—it does not have a real presidency by the standards of virtually every other country in the world. A de facto theological dictator, the Ayatollah Khamenei, has control over all military and security forces, all intelligence organizations, foreign policy, police and justice system, and the media. He has the power to both limit those who can run for the presidency and the Majlis (Iran's legislature) and to use religious authorities to bloc virtually any legislation, policy, and executive action.

Iran's search for nuclear capabilities and for long-range missiles occurred because of the supreme leader and those around him, not because of Ahmadinejad. All of these programs began long before Ahmadinejad was elected to his first term.

The same is true of Iranian policies that use Israel as a justification for the steady growth of Iran's military industries, its Islamic Revolutionary Guards and capabilities for asymmetric warfare, and its capability to pose a threat to shipping and the flow of oil inside and outside the Gulf. Iran's links to Hezbollah and Lebanon, to Syria, and exploitation of hard-line Palestinian elements like Hamas all predate Ahmadinejad—sometimes by decades. There is nothing new about Iranian pressure on Iraq, and Ahmadinejad never controlled either the Al Quds force—the Iranians who train and equipment outside Shi'ite militias—or the Vevak—Iran's equivalent of the CIA.

It is also far from clear that any of Ahmadinejad's opposition—either candidates like Mousavi or the majority of those who voted for him—opposed these aspects of Iranian policy. The opposition did want a more moderate and responsible *style* to Iran's diplomacy and security policies, but it not clear that it was seeking broad substantive changes in these policies. It is equally unclear that any talk of a “grand bargain” that could reconcile Iran and the United States is now anything more than a hope that borders on being a myth. A traveling circus of Iranian apologists does not make this bargain an option Iran's current leadership will really support.

No one should demonize Iran because of this election any more than they should have demonized it before the election. Americans who make a worst-case interpretation of every Iranian action, and Israelis who focus on nothing but Iran as an existential threat, ignore the reality that many Iranian actions are as defensive and opportunistic as aggressive. The same is true of Arabs that talk about Iran as a hegemon and as dominating a “Shi'ite crescent.”

Iran is a truly serious security problem in the Gulf and the Middle East. A nuclear Iran would pose serious risks to Iran's neighbors, Israel, and the stable flow of oil to fuel the world's economy. Iran is a serious irritant in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria and in the Arab-Israeli peace process. The world lives with a number of such threats, however, and uses diplomacy, containment, and deterrence to deal with them.

At the same time, those who try to sanctify Iran, or who hope that dialogue and diplomacy can achieve sudden, major changes in Iran's behavior, need to be equally cautious. Iran's policy goals have presented problems for its neighbors and the United States ever since the Ayatollah Khomeini consolidated power in the early 1980s. Iran has evolved, but its fundamental character and security goals have been relatively consistent. Its opportunism has posed a long series of problems and at least low-level threats. A triumph of hope over experience rarely proves to be as successful a policy as its advocates believe.

Fortunately, the Obama administration, other Western leaders, and most of Iran's neighbors seem realistic about the fact that they may have to deal with “Iran as usual” indefinitely into the future. This does not mean that the United States and other states will not, and should not, pursue diplomacy and dialogue. Even slow, small gains can matter over the mid and long term and have some effect on Iranian behavior. The reality is, however, that any radical change in Iran's behavior requires a level of change in its internal politics and leadership that goes far beyond the outcome of any presidential election with so many limits on who can run and their power if elected. Hopefully, this does not mean that Iran will pursue the same basic policies for the next decade and beyond. In practice, however, no one outside Iran can prudently plan on anything else.

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