

The Iranian Election – A Briefing

June 2009 - By Hanieh ZIAEI,
Middle East and Mediterranean Program, CITpax

On the 12th of June 2009, the Iranians will go to the polls to vote for a new president. It will be the 10th presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Despite all the criticism regarding the lack of democracy, Iranians choose their president every four years; the election calendar is fully respected. This paper examines the positions of all the presidential candidates and the main issues under debate in the election campaign.

I. The President and his Powers

Inside the Islamic Republic of Iran, the President (*Ra'is-e Jomhour*) is elected by direct universal suffrage every four years, and can be re-elected once for a second term. Unlike in the United States, the Iranian president is not the head of state but the highest executive authority, i.e. he chairs the Council of Ministers, which is comparable to the role of the president in the French political system. The Iranian constitution provides for limited power for the president: he holds no right to dissolve the *Majles* (parliament) and he cannot impose any policies on it. He answers to the Supreme Leader, the people, and the Parliament. However, he is subordinated to the Supreme Leader and the Parliament and could face a non-confidence vote in the *Majles*, after ratification by the Supreme Leader (currently Ayatollah Ruhollah Ali Khamenei).

He remains nevertheless the highest elected official in the Islamic Republic, second only to the Supreme Leader. According to the Iranian constitution, the President is responsible for the "functions of the executive", such as signing treaties, agreements with other countries and international organizations; national planning and budget, and state employment affairs; appointing ministers, governors, and ambassadors subject to the approval of the Parliament. Unlike many other countries, in Iran the President does not have full control over foreign policy, the armed forces, or the nuclear policy of the Iranian state, which is in fact under ultimate control of the Supreme Leader. In other words, the Iranian President cannot decide singly or arbitrarily on such matters without taking into consideration the Supreme Leader's view.

The Islamic regime, since its seizure of power, has been conscious of the necessity of representation, or at least an "appearance of representation", expected by people. Farideh Farhi underlined that « *the institution of elections has always been considered a*

signpost for the legitimacy of the system »¹. The Islamic Republic of Iran considers itself as the representative of the Iranian people and attempts to show its legitimacy through the polls. Thus, if the Iranian government is not democratic, at least it presents itself as representative.

The multiparty system is recognized in the Iranian constitution (*Article 26*); nevertheless, all political parties are dissolved since 1981. The electoral game exists, but one cannot really talk about “political parties” as just some of the political players are permitted. Two groups oppose each other: the conservatives and the “revisionists” (generally called “reformists”). These groups do not question the nature of the Iranian regime.

The system in place has a “filtration mechanism”, which means that there is a preliminary selection system for the candidates. This selection is done by the Guardian Council, thus effectively removing electoral freedom to a great extent. Moreover, the rate of abstention is generally important in Iranian elections. This observation could explain the rejection of candidates to ensure that the people always vote for the same “closed circle”. So the Iranian regime should find new players and captivating issues in order to attract the electors.

¹ Farideh Farhi, “The politics of reform in the Islamic Republic of Iran” in *Islam and political legitimacy*, New York, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p.61

II. The Candidates

After the fastidious “filtration mechanism”, only four prominent candidates survived screening by the Guardian Council: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, of the revolutionary old guard; former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG) Mohsen Rezaee; and former *Majles* speaker Mehdi Karroubi. The following part focuses on the candidates and main characteristics of the election campaign.



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Current Iranian President, previously Mayor of Tehran

52 years old

PhD in Civil engineering (specialization in Traffic Management)

The political situation of the current President of Iran, **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, is complex. On one hand, most of the middle class and intellectuals are against him and his plans; on the other, regardless of economic and political problems, most of the religiously minded and rural populations are with him because he mirrors their habits and “talks their talk”. He holds government meetings in small cities and tries to attract voters in these constituencies with populist slogans and actions.

During May 2009, the Supreme Leader vocally supported several times Ahmadinejad’s Government and policies. In today’s Iran, the Supreme Leader’s ideas remain a very significant factor in determining the outcome of national elections. This support can work in two opposite ways: It can rally conservatives and the religious around a candidate - but at the same time persuade others to manifest their opposition to the regime by not voting for Ahmadinejad.

At the beginning of his mandate, Ahmadinejad promised economic justice and “clean” government, and presented himself as a man of the people, an incorruptible and unpretentious politician who has the interests of the poor at heart. However, he has not hesitated to practice favouritism and nepotism, appointing relatives to key positions. The question ahead is if the people will sanction him for some unkept promises and the lack of transparency in some actions and decisions.



Mohsen Rezaee

Secretary of the Expediency Council

Former Chief Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards

54 years old

Mechanical engineer, and PhD in Economic studies

The other presidential candidate from the conservative party is **Mohsen Rezaee**, the Secretary of the *Expediency Council* of the IRI (*Majma Tashkhis Maslahat Nezam*), previously Chief Commander of the *Iranian Revolutionary Guards* (IRG: *Sepah Pasdaran Enqelâb Eslâmi*) and former military commander (for 16 years). After a long period of internal discussion among the conservatives, he finally decided to pursue his campaign as the standard bearer for those conservatives who are dissatisfied with Ahmadinejad. After the announcement of his candidature, his first speech criticized Ahmadinejad’s government saying that “*the country was on the way to “a retrograde development”*”.

Mohsen Rezaee is on the official wanted list of Interpol for allegations of "crimes against life and health" (during his time as Chief Commander of the IRG) and the 1994 AMIA bombing case in Argentina. Iranians say that he would be a president who would not be able to leave the country! The candidature of Rezaee is a signal of discrepancies and differences in the conservative camp. A range of conservatives are against Ahmadinejad’s policies and do not want to support him again. Their votes will be divided between Rezaee and Mir Hossein Mousavi (see below). Indeed, these kinds of discrepancies among the conservatives could be an advantage for the reformist camp.

The Supreme Leader's support for Ahmadinejad however remains a strong countervailing force.

None of the well-known conservative figures, such as Ali Akbar Velayati (former Foreign Minister of Iran in the Rafsanjani government), who had previously shown an interest to be a conservative candidate to stop Ahmadinejad from destroying the party and the country, support any of the candidates. Ali Akbar Velayati declared that he will not support Ahmadinejad, but he did not declare his support for Rezaee either. However, Ali Larijani (the Chairman of Parliament and former the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council) has declared his support for Mohsen Rezaee.



Mehdi Karroubi

Speaker of the Parliament (1989-1992 & 2000-2004)

72 years old

Theology, Law and Islamic studies in Qom and Tehran University

On the reformist side, the first person who announced his candidacy for the upcoming election was **Mehdi Karroubi**. He is an Iranian politician and cleric and was a founding member and chairman of the *Association of Combatant Clerics Party*. He was the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament from 1989 to 1992 and from 2000 to 2004 and ran as a candidate in the 2005 presidential election. After the results of the previous election, he was the only candidate who wrote several letters to the Supreme Leader expressing his objection to the results, complaining of fraud. Achieving no results from these objections, he established a party and a newspaper called *Etemad Melli (The National Trust)*. However, most of the reformist and intellectuals do not consider him a true reformist because of his opposition to Iran's Parliamentary resignation in 2004, a sweeping ban on candidates at the time who are now running for parliamentary election later this month. He has a skilled campaign team and is the only reformist who still has a newspaper that has not been closed by the government. He has involved Gholamhossein Karbaschi, the popular former Mayor of Tehran, (1988 and 1998), as his campaign chief and future prime minister.

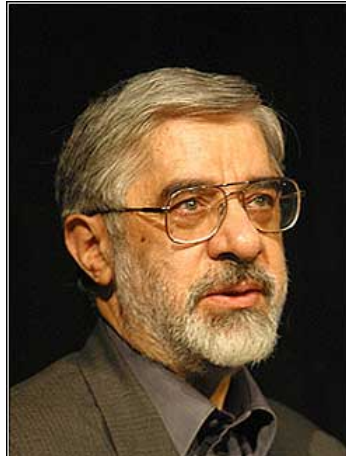
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By **Hanieh ZIAEI**, Middle East and Mediterranean Program, CITpax

www.citpax.org

The political history of Karroubi suggests that he is a reformist. He was one of the main supporters of Khatami 12 years ago (he was called “Sheikh of reform”) and his policies are closer to the reformists; he frequently discusses human rights issues (pledging to free political prisoners) and the inclusion of women in the political system. For instance, he has just introduced **Jamileh Kadivar**² as his shadow Islamic Culture Minister. Moreover, he is open to criticism and believes that criticism against the regime can be viewed as room for discussion and open debate.



Mir Hossein Mousavi
5th and last Prime Minister of Iran (1980-1989)
67 years old
Masters degree in Architecture

After long hesitation, the second reformist who announced his candidacy was former President Mohammad Khatami. He has been popular among university students, intellectuals, and artists and is better known for his reforms in the cultural field (freedom for cultural activities) than for his economic and employment policies during the eight years of his presidency. Khatami has earned considerable opposition from the religious and radical parties. The conservative government newspaper, *Kayhan*, (with its chief editor selected by Supreme Leader) threatened to face him with a similar fate as Benazir Bhutto, the assassinated presidential candidate in Pakistan. Khatami withdrew his candidacy in favour of **Mir Hossein Mousavi**, former Prime Minister of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Since 1989, he has been absent from politics and focused on advising Khatami and **Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani** (former President of Iran from 1989 to 1997).

² Jamileh Kadivar is the wife of Ata-Allah Mohajerani, the Islamic Culture Minister of the first Khatami government.

Mousavi is well regarded for his successful management of the country during the period of war, but is also notorious for his “communist-like” economic programs at that time. Although he now claims that those were war-time policies, many consider him a “mystery option” because of his “political fast” of the last two decades. Moreover, a great unknown about Mousavi, reputed more as a “leftist conservative” than a reformist, is his chemistry with Supreme Leader Khamenei. The latter has made some critical comments about Mousavi and the two did not have particularly rosy relations during the 1980s when Khamenei was a largely “ceremonial president” and Mousavi the hands-on Prime Minister. If elected, Mousavi will have to realize that times have changed and he will have to show greater deference to Khamenei than he did when he was Prime Minister.

Mousavi is an architect and currently the president of the *Iranian Academy of Arts*. He is supported by a majority of reformists and many students and intellectuals who are actively participating in his campaign. His wife, **Zahra Rahnavard**, is an artist and holds a PhD in Political science. For the first time in Iran the spouse of a candidate is so actively involved in her husband’s campaign. During the campaign they arrived at a speech hand-in-hand, a rare event in Iran’s political culture after the revolution. Newspapers wrote that by this act, “*Mousavi not only respected women but also attached importance to his wife*”. Zahra Rahnavard could be an important asset to her husband’s campaign because she openly questioned why students are imprisoned for expressing their opinions, why liberal-minded professors are forcefully retired, why there has not been a single female presidential candidate approved, and why there are no women Cabinet ministers. These kinds of taboo questions could work in favour of the Mousavi candidacy, but could also backfire by provoking opposition from the more conservative and traditional parts of the society.

The Mousavi campaign this year has had the chance to use a clever symbol: the colour green. All his supporters wear green, or they hold a green rope in their hand. On their Facebook pages, all his fans make their pictures green. Green is of course the colour of Islam and the Shiites, and permits Mousavi to attract the religious - at the same time, it is the colour of growth and nature he uses to refer to a “new spring”. Other candidates have not taken on such a symbolic “advertising” colour; however, for television clips, they are provided with a colour, which was green for Mousavi and red for Ahmadinejad. Karroubi mostly uses white colour with the word “change” (similar to the Obama campaign).

During the TV debate between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi, tension between the two candidates increased and Ahmadinejad even threatened Mousavi’s wife (Zahra Rahnavard). During the debate with Karroubi, Ahmadinejad made much use of figures and graphs, which were of dubious validity. Mousavi responded on television by saying: “*Hey people! This guy (Ahmadinejad) is a liar; he looks at the camera and tells you that white is black*”.

III. The Key Question of the Economy

Contrary to previous elections which zoomed in on democratic slogans (freedom given to the press, book publishers and film producers; formation of councils and local elections during Khatami's term; establishment of liberal forces against monopolist forces), the main issue of this campaign is the economic situation. Iran is facing some fundamental impediments. When it comes to economic management, for example, Iran has the highest rate of inflation in the Middle East and eighth highest in the world. In that light, the candidates will focus on the matter that is closer to hearts and minds of people.

The bad economic decisions taken by Ahmadinejad caused around 25% inflation (according to official data) and an end to budget surpluses rising from oil production. Nevertheless, this was never officially admitted and Ahmadinejad denied it in his public debate with Karroubi. Ahmadinejad is accused of having changed certain definitions in order to improve statistics. According to government figures, the unemployment rate fell from 15% to 10% during Ahmadinejad's presidency. However, this might have other reasons that pure economic performance, as Rezaee notes: "During the Khatami period, you were employed if you worked at least 16 hours per week: But during the Ahmadinejad time, you are already deemed employed if you work only one hour per week."

Mehdi Karroubi is famous for his courageous and direct objections to the regime's policies and is popular in rural areas due to his economic stimulus packages: he wants Iran to become independent from oil income and instead more dependent on taxes. He suggests transforming the oil company into a stock market for all the Iranians, so that Iranian citizen will have a share of national resources. Although in past elections he has suggested paying \$50 to each Iranian over 18, he focuses this time rather on Ahmadinejad's weak economic performance. The latter seems to borrow from Karroubi's economic plans. He now talks about Karroubi's plan for donation of oil stocks to the people as one of his plans. Karroubi in the meantime wants to support private business and distribute most public sectors companies among private sectors.

IV. The Question of "Personal Freedoms"

The second most important issue of the election is the *question of freedom of speech*. The last four years were some of the worst years for freedom of publication and journalism. Many books were banned and the performance of many movies and plays forbidden. Most of the magazines (*Shahrivande Emrooz*, *Yase-Noe*, *Shargh*) that are critical of the government were closed and many journalists (for instance Roxana Saberi) put in prison. Even bloggers were obliged to register their blogs in the Ministry of Culture. This year presidential candidates do not have active blogs, thus the issue of blogging issue is not as important as in previous elections. Nevertheless, some candidates (such as Karroubi and Rezaee) have their own websites to display their biography, responsibilities, and points of view. Recently, Iran blocked access to the social networking site "Facebook" in order to stop supporters of Mousavi from using the site for his campaign. On his page on Facebook page, the reformist candidate has more than 5000 supporters. 2009 is the year of the "electronic campaign". Having seen Obama's successful "Facebook campaign", the Iranian people seem to adopt this strategy for this presidential elections in Iran.

Since 1997, the question of social and personal freedoms has become an important election issue and will be vital for mobilisation, particularly as reformist candidates are banking on it. Promising greater individual freedoms to youths, from different social classes and not only the intellectual, middle class and the Iranian bourgeoisie, was instrumental in the two landslide victories of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and 2001. His promises mobilized a large section of young voters who were otherwise politically apathetic. But although, social and cultural freedom increased, the morality police nevertheless continued to operate under Khatami.

During the 2005 election, the question of social freedoms and the state's interference in lifestyle matters again came up as an important issue. Even a hardliner candidate such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appreciated the mobilizing power of promising greater personal freedoms. Although it may sound quite ironic today, the candidate Ahmadinejad said he would loosen states control over the personal affairs of the people. In one of his pre-election television interviews, he questioned the role of the morality police and said: "*Let our children arrange their hair any way they wish. It does not concern you and me ... the government should fix the economy of the nation and improve its atmosphere ... people have variegated tastes*"³.

³ Channel 1 of the national Iranian TV , June 2005 (a week before the election), available also on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwBwBiBC9No>

Mir Hossein Mousavi promised that he would end controversial restrictions on clothing deemed "un-Islamic." In a country where 70% of the population is under 30, the question of social freedom appeals to a majority of voters. Demographically, the youth vote can determine the fate of any candidate; It is therefore not surprising that Mousavi made this pledge. But did he say so only to gain the support of the youth? Or are his intentions sincere? Considering the factionalism of the Iranian political system, one can doubt that he could deliver on those promises? Many conservatives will vote for Mousavi due to his experience as a prime minister during the war. Mousavi is an architect and painter as well, which make him a more appealing candidate for intellectuals and artists of Iran. During Khatami's eight year mandate, the situation of Iranian artists improved and there was great progress in art and cultural productions. But during Ahmadinejad's mandate, the situation worsened again and cultural activists, especially in cinema, publication and music sectors went through many hardships.

V. Elections and Foreign Policy

Mousavi has a foreign policy team made up entirely of individuals associated with former President Mohammad Khatami. He has pledged more "constructive relations with the world" and he would likely amend some of Ahmadinejad's specific stances with respect to cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Rezaee has pledged to prioritize Iran's relations with its neighbours, particularly in the Persian Gulf region, and has singled out Saudi-Iran relations as a major area in need of immediate repair.

Karroubi, on the other hand, has been more vocal than the other two candidates in criticizing Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, particularly with regard to the president's stance on the Holocaust, which, according to Karroubi, "is not an Iranian issue". His team consists mostly of well-known, successful technocratic managers in Iran. He announced to "*have relations with all countries in the world except Israel*".

The reformists believe there is much to exploit on the foreign policy front. They cite Iran's isolation, its damaged ties with Europe, alienation from the Arab world and UN sanctions. While the conservatives stay mistrustful *vis-à-vis* Western countries, and specifically the United States, they seem for the moment to hesitate regarding their stances towards the new Obama administration.

→ *The Nuclear Issue*

The various candidates have not really used the nuclear issue in the campaign because it is the only fully popular policy of Ahmadinejad's government - so the competitors never talk openly about it. During Ahmadinejad's mandate, the nuclear question could be seen as a strategic internal policy for the Iranian regime. They are practising a strategy of "externalisation" of domestic problems by focusing on foreign threats to stimulate patriotism and nationalism. Therefore, for nationalistic Iranians, Ahmadinejad's willingness to pursue nuclear power is his most important point of strength.

In Iran, the nuclear issue can now be considered as a new nationalistic motto, and the Iranian government focuses on this essential need for security. This practice permits the Iranian regime to divert attention from troublesome domestic issues (the economic situation, unemployment, drug addiction, inflation, etc.). As a result, for the other candidates, they may want to capitalize on the adverse impact of United Nations and US sanctions on Iran, but they do not dare to do this publicly. Mousavi in particular has gone on record promising to continue the uranium enrichment programme.

→ *The Future of Iran-US Relations*

For the moment, there is little substance in the candidates' arguments regarding the future of Iran-US relations. Ahmadinejad said nothing about it and the other candidates half-heartedly indicated some interest in the issue and added that they would negotiate with the US only on a level of "equality". According to reports from Tehran, Ahmadinejad sent an envoy to New York recently for negotiations with the US regarding the opening of a US diplomatic office in Tehran. This, together with Ahmadinejad's overtures toward Obama, such as sending him a letter of congratulations on winning the US presidency and the release of jailed US-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi, provides indications that Ahmadinejad is determined to negotiate with the US. Yet, he wants to do so from a position of strength rather than weakness, something for which he has criticized his reformist predecessor.

Paradoxically to Iranian policy, and compared with some Arab countries, the Iranian people in general do not have a strong anti-American feeling. In the Middle East, the Arab street has developed a large mistrust towards the USA, even if Arab leaders avoid criticizing the US publicly. The war in Iraq and the military occupation in Afghanistan contributed to maintain this anti-Americanism. On the contrary, in Iran where the government does not hesitate to criticise American actions, the Iranian people and civil society do not have a visceral hatred for Americans. For instance, after September 11, a lot of Iranians payed tribute to those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center. The "American Dream" still exists among the younger Iranian generation and the United States still represents for them the country of technology, modernism and economic success, despite the current credit crunch. Therefore, the candidates who are in favour of dialogue with Barack Obama will find success among young voters and the women activists. Improved relations with the USA is an issue that gains some votes from middle and upper middle classes but might also cause losses among many conservative voters and residents of smaller cities.

There is a need of "trust building" which is completely absent and not only between US and Iran but between US, Iran and the Middle East, and it is obviously that it takes time, possibly more than one American presidential mandate.

VI. Conclusions

Iran's troubled economy, rising unemployment and the intersection of foreign policy (which includes sanctions), weigh heavy on voters, who want to see a much-needed breakthrough in the stalemated US-Iran relations. Ahmadinejad and Karroubi play more on the economical card, while Mousavi focuses on the question of social and personal freedom. Rezaee seem to be more neutral on these two main issues. So there is a challenge between the arguments in favour of the economic issues and the social and personal freedom. Mousavi seems to be the principal rival to Ahmadinejad. Finally, the support of the Supreme Leader to the different candidates could be decisive and for the moment he supports the conservative camp.

The election in Iran is a mechanism of the system, but a subordinated and controlled mechanism. Nevertheless, domestic pressure appears to be more productive than international pressure and seems to be for the moment the best way to push for a change in Iran.

Ahmadinejad has raised much financial power and has the media behind him. This has obliged the reformists to spend all their energy to bring the elections to a second round. The chances for a second round are great because Mousavi and Rezaee can split the hardliners' vote and thus reduce Ahmadinejad's chances for re-election. A second round would take place generally one week later between the top two vote-getters. Nevertheless, there is just one round if a candidate wins instantly than 50% of the vote. Mousavi called for a “coalition government” of national unity. This appeals to a broad segment of voters who have shown dissatisfaction with the present administration's rather monolithic make-up. However, Ahmadinejad, who is ahead according to some Tehran polls, may increase his chances should he pledge for a more inclusive administration during a second four-year term.

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