

Iran's presidential coup

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All predictions that former president Hashemi Rafsanjani would win Iran's presidential election, including Rafsanjani's own, went wrong. Instead, according to official figures, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the hardline mayor of Tehran, was the decisive victor in the second round by 61% to 39% [1].

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This was a coup d'état led by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It was foreseeable as soon as it became known that between 66 and 70 of the new members of the *majlis* (parliament) elected in [February 2004](#) [3] were members of the [Revolutionary Guards](#) [4] militia – enough to give these forces, and the ruling elite, control of the institution.

In the presidential election, the coup extended to the executive branch. I had thought that [Mohammed-Baqer Ghalibaf](#) [5], Iran's former police chief and head of the customs service, would receive the full backing of conservative regime elements, but just before the [first round](#) [6] of the election their support suddenly switched to Ahmadinejad. Ghalibaf himself went silent after his defeat, but not before making a statement whose significance was not fully registered – that he was “surprised” at his performance at the polls during the first round; “something had changed”, he said.

Indeed it had. [General Firouzabadi](#) [7], head of the joint chiefs of staff, issued an order that all militia forces vote for Ahmadinejad. [Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi](#) [8], a real hardliner, had issued a *fatwa* urging everyone to do their “*sharia* duty” and vote for Ahmadinejad. There was also a rumour that every *basiji* (pro-regime vigilante) was told to recruit ten ordinary citizens to cast a vote for Ahmadinejad.

Why the need for a coup d'état? Because the legitimacy of the [Islamic Republic](#) [9] was under threat. If one of the other candidates – particularly Rafsanjani, former parliamentary speaker [Mehdi Karroubi](#) [10], or [Mostafa Moin](#) [11] – had started implementing the freedoms and open society they were promising the people, this could have been the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic.

Hence, the determination to show the world that more than 60% of the electorate voted – and hence the ballot stuffing. There are rumours, reported on [CNN](#) [12], that several ministry of interior officials are under arrest because they wanted to reveal details about the riggings. Karroubi, [Rafsanjani](#) [13] and Moin have all alluded to this as well.

Ahmadinejad's attraction

Why did Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [14] – who was a member of the special forces of the Revolutionary Guards in the post-1979 revolution period, assigned with assassinations and other similar clandestine tasks – also receive so many “real” votes [15]?

- During the campaign he played the *mostazaf* (“oppressed”) role very well and told people that he was one of them – a simple, honest and hard-working man who came from the same background as they do, living in a modest, 150-square-metre apartment in south Tehran (which was shown on TV). Ahmadinejad connected to the poorer people – the majority of Iranians – who are struggling to meet their very basic needs. He conveyed a sense that he understood their problems and will address their needs. People responded by reasoning that many types of people have become president: let’s give this guy – who is like us, from us, one of us – a chance
- Hashemi Rafsanjani was perceived [16] as the epitome of the first generation of revolutionary leaders – corrupt, concerned only with power and the accumulation of wealth (through the misuse of power), and having no regard for the plight of the *mostazafin*
- The people were tired of a cleric ruling the country and didn’t want it again
- The repeated election slogans by all candidates about “freedom”, a “modern and open society” and “opening direct talks with the United States” had little appeal to the majority of the people who are struggling to meet their very basic needs
- The *mostazafin*? were much easier to lure to polling stations than were “uptown” people

Rafsanjani’s repulsion

Why did Hashemi Rafsanjani receive only a proportion of the votes [17] he and others thought he would?

- He seemed to tell people that this time around [18] he wanted to follow their wishes – to create more freedom, a more open society, more privatisation of the economy, set the conditions for attracting foreign direct investment and better relations with the US. Since he is rich [19] and in a position of power, he wanted to leave a legacy – to be a true Amir-Kabir [20] (“great prince”). But the majority of the people do not like, trust or believe in Rafsanjani. In fact, they dislike him. Many of those who voted for him did so because they faced a choice between the bad (a corrupt old-timer) and the worse (an executioner of the infamous Evin prison who opposes liberalisation; Ahmadinejad had even made a statement, published in all the newspapers, that “the people did not make the revolution to introduce democracy”!). The liberal element of the society was terrified by Ahmadinejad’s political agenda and voted for Rafsanjani
- There was a perception that Rafsanjani abandoned rather than supported Mohammad Khatami when the latter stood up against hardline militants who suppressed the student uprisings
- The younger people who campaigned for Rafsanjani did not, it seems, wholeheartedly vote for him; only the elder members of the “silent minority” can be counted among his true supporters.

The irony is that the *mostazafin*, who desperately seek a better life for themselves and their families, would have had a better chance under Rafsanjani, whom they dislike and rejected, than under Ahmadinejad – based on the agenda the latter put forward throughout his campaign. New investments, employment and a higher standard of living will not materialise under Ahmadinejad unless, once in power, he sees the realities of governance and reverses his promises.

What now in Iran?

The powers behind the throne believe they have thwarted a potential challenge to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and its perpetuation, and that they are now in control of all three of the state's power-centres [21]. They believe they control Ahmadinejad and will be able to give him directives to implement. I think that, in the long term, they may be wrong.

Also in openDemocracy, Mohsen Sazegara, Kaveh Ehsani, Mansour Farhang, Mehrangiz Kar and other Iranian analysts debate [21] the strategies and prospects for Iranian democracy

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Ghalibaf, Ahmadinejad and similar younger officers in the militia corps are second-generation revolutionaries. They have witnessed first hand the corrupt practices of the first-generation revolutionaries – most of whom are now 70 and older – and how the latter have become rich and powerful.

It is now the second generation's turn. Like a creeping-plant, their forces will slowly extend control over as many of the money-generating institutions as they can. Once this happens, they may decide to open up the country economically and begin moves to undermine the health, and even the lives, of some of Iran's key leaders.

Moreover, throughout his campaign Ahmadinejad referred to various "mafias" controlling many sectors of Iran's economy and his determination to break this – especially the oil industry (controlled by Rafsanjani) and the auto industry (overseen by another clique). The *motalafe*, the bazaar merchants who have dominated trade in Iran since 1979, voted for Hashemi Rafsanjani with the expectation that he would be the next president. They, too, may become the target of the new president's attacks on groups that hold tight sway over certain sectors of the economy.

But what about the following of the departing president, Mohammad Khatami [22], the "Second of Khordad Movement"? For all practical purposes, the movement is dead unless it openly dares to disassociate itself from the regime and join the student movement [23] to create a formal opposition force inside Iran. If it does this, others may coalesce around it to establish an opposition party.

Difficult? Yes, but plausible, depending on how gutsy the liberal elements want to be. What is certain, however, is that for the moment this potential opposition group cannot count on the support of the *mostazafin* as their natural constituency. Even before the election, this current could not identify itself with the opposition outside Iran even though it was desperate for change to give them a better life.

One thing is certain: there are many political twists and turns ahead in Iran!

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Links:

[1] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/06/26/news/iran.php>

[2] <http://www.iranscan.net/page/Iran/>

[3] <http://www.answers.com/topic/iranian-majlis-election-2004>

[4] <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051904a.shtml>

[5] <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/spiegel/0,1518,360535,00.html>

- [6] http://www.economist.com/agenda/displayStory.cfm?story_id=4083608
[7] http://iqna.ir/NewsBodyDesc_en.asp?lang=en&ProdID=20626
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