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Ahmadinejad II

What will the Iranian president's second term look like?

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It is becoming increasingly clear that the opposition protests that have rocked Iran over the past month have seriously undermined the credibility of the regime. In the last month, four of Iran's highest ranking ayatollahs have issued statements defiantly declaring the current regime "illegitimate." Iranian Nobel Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi has asked the international community to refuse to negotiate with the Ahmadinejad presidency until the crackdown on opposition ends. And two of the most important groups within the Shi'ite clerical establishment--Majma' Rohaniyat-e Mobarez and Majma' Moddaresin o Mohaggegin Hozeye Elmiye Qom--have issued statements doubting the legitimacy of the election.

But Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lives in a parallel universe peopled by corrupt sycophants whose continued presence at the trough of public funds is dependent on his continued presidency. He is as willfully ignorant of the sentiments of Iranian society as of the realities of the modern world. He talks constantly of his desire to help the world's poor and dispossessed, and expedite the return of Shiism's hidden imam. In a speech delivered about two weeks after his electoral coup in June, he

claimed that his election “heralded the death of liberal democracy in the world.” Though Ahmadinejad will probably be even more deluded during his second term, the changing domestic and international dynamics will likely force him back to reality.

Ahmadinejad’s domestic agenda was previewed during a taped meeting last month with his spiritual guru, Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi--who is notorious not only for providing the theological underpinnings of Ahmadinejad’s messianic fervor, but also for fueling his disdain for liberal democracy. Mesbah-Yazdi rejects all things Western: To him, elections and parliaments are silly Western paraphernalia, and even the name of the country--the Islamic Republic of Iran--reflects liberal appeasement. Laying out the plans for his second term, Ahmadinejad promised his spiritual guru a full implementation of Islamic values throughout Iran’s educational and cultural system. Iranians have hitherto had nothing like “true Islam,” he said, and as soon as people “get a whiff” of this genuine faith, they will rush to embrace it.

If the attempt at an Islamic cultural revolution undertaken by the regime in the 1980s is any indication, Ahmadinejad’s promised “Islamization” of society can only be realized by a massive purge of the educational system, and by a far more Procrustean censorship in the cultural domain. Many of the more traditional members of the Islamic elite (particularly former president Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani) will face serious challenges to their authority; some might even face jail sentences.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad will likely continue the process of enriching commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and members of the paramilitary Basij forces--as he did during his first four years in office. Four years ago, he ran on a populist economic platform that promised to fight corruption and put a bigger slice of the oil pie on each plate. He ran this year on the same platform despite the fact that he has surrounded himself by many IRGC commanders notorious for corruption--foremost amongst them being Sadeq Mahsuli, the interior minister in charge of the elections. And it seems that few, if any, of those accused of corruption have served a day in prison.

In addition, as many reformists have warned, the republican elements of the 1979 constitution are in serious jeopardy. Ahmadinejad has more than once hinted at his wish to follow in the footsteps of Hugo Chavez by changing the constitution and becoming a life-time president. Today, hundreds of Ahmadinejad's emissaries are in Venezuela working with the Chavez government. There are reports of close cooperation between the two countries' intelligence agencies--particularly on methods of crowd and opposition control, as well as co-opting the lower classes through patronage. The relationship is not surprising considering the many similarities between the two leaders' populism--ranging from election-rigging methods to government-sanctioned anti-Semitism.

However, there are several factors that work against the implementation of these plans. Iranian society has now recognized the power of its own civil disobedience. The two supposedly losing candidates, Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karubi, show no sign of cracking under increasing pressure to accept defeat. The youth--written off until a few weeks ago by most scholars and analysts as incorrigibly sybaritic, self-centered, and

apolitical--have shown remarkable resilience and courage in asserting their rights. Even if the election results are not overturned, the regime's air of invincibility has been shattered, and will no longer be able to rule without regard to public will.

In international politics, Ahmadinejad can be expected to be even more publicly confrontational. As Moussavi has suggested in a recent statement, Ahmadinejad's overseas saber-rattling will be a thinly veiled attempt to garner internationally the respect he so clearly lacks at home. The heart-wrenching pictures of brutality on Iranian streets broadcast over international media have convinced more and more people that the regime cannot be trusted with a bomb. But it is highly unlikely that he will publicly compromise on the nuclear issue: Today, the regime, ever more bereft of legitimacy at home and abroad, cannot seem to be making a "compromise" on the nuclear issue. More than ever, they need to claim a "victory"--and continuing some level of enrichment is a "red line" beyond which they will not relent.

But the regime's desperate economic situation--the need to create about a million jobs a year to just keep unemployment at the same level as today, and to invest billions of dollars in the country's failing oil infrastructure--will inevitably force it to seek rapprochement with the West in general, and with the United States in particular. There are already signs that the Islamic Republic is losing much of its influence in the Muslim world. The Iranian-backed Hezbollah lost the recent election in Lebanon, and there are hints that Hamas might be inching towards an alliance with the Palestinian Authority. Some radical Sunni groups like

the Muslim Brotherhood, who had earlier been flirting with Iran, are now voicing criticism of Iran's flawed election.

Perhaps most significantly, the regime's Shiite allies in Iraq--from Muqtada al-Sadr to Ayatollah Sayed Mohamad Baqir Al-Hakim--are also distancing themselves from their Persian patrons. A few weeks before the Iranian election, Rafsanjani made a trip to Iraq in which he met with Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an Iranian-born cleric who is the highest ranking Shiite figure in the world; in a subsequent official statement, the Iraq-based cleric emphasized how important it was that voices of moderation like Rafsanjani's retain their power. The comment was clearly meant as a warning to Ahmadinejad and other members of the regime, who had been using increasingly tough language against Rafsanjani (even jailing his daughter briefly); the announcement of the meeting is still featured prominently on Sistani's website. Sistani's refusal to publicly support the Iranian regime is only the most evident sign of a rift that has long existed between his brand of Shiism, and the kind promulgated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and now followed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The Iranian regime's weakening influence across the region--particularly in Iraq, where it holds the most leverage over U.S. interests--will force it to be more pragmatic in its international dealings.

Ahmadinejad, buoyed by support from Khamenei and the IRGC, will still have a relatively strong hand heading into his second term. But the continued defiance of the Iranian people and an increasing number of the Islamic elite, dire economic realities, and a rising chorus of criticism from democracies all around the world make it highly unlikely that Ahmadinejad will be able to ignore reality for very long.