

✓ Ad muted. [Undo](#)

We'll do our best to show you more relevant ads in the future.
 Help us show you better ads by updating your [ads preferences](#).

Google

Forbes
 .com

Commentary

Iran: A Coup In Three Steps

Abbas Milani, 06.15.09, 9:20 AM ET

What happened in Iran last Friday was a fully planned but clumsily executed coup, intended to obliterate the last vestiges of democracy in the country. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini abducted the democratic revolution and instead of creating the free and inclusive republic he had promised during the months before the revolution--a republic, he said, that would have no clerics in any position of power--he established what he called *Velayat-e Fagih* or the rule of the Shiite Jurist. In this regime, a disproportionate share of power remains in the hands of an unelected cleric whose legitimacy rests not in the support of the people but of the divine.

At the same time, Ayatollah Khomeini was forced to heed the overwhelmingly democratic aspirations of the people at the time by allowing for a presidency that was to be directly elected by the people. The constitution thus became--and remains--an incongruent mix of despotism and democracy.

the first elected president, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, proved hard for the clergy to manage. It became clear that in spite of y constitutional constraints on the power of the president, he could still become a thorn in the side of the clerics and obstruct their attempt to consolidate absolute power. Bani-Sadr was quickly impeached and Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical allies decided to limit the possibility of a repeat of the traumatic experience. A system they called *Nezarat-e Estesvabi*, or Beneficent Supervision, was put in place, allowing the jurist and his appointed 12-man Guardian Council to vet every candidate. Only those deemed "friendly" to *Velayat-e Fagih* would be allowed to run in any campaign.

In 1997, Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Khamenei had yet another surprise. In spite of the vetting process, a reformist named Mohammad Khatami was elected president in a landslide. For the next eight years, Khamenei was involved in a war of attrition to neuter any attempt by the new president and his reformist allies in the parliament to introduce elements of democracy in the country. Khamenei used a combination of judicial and paralegal tools and tricks to abort all efforts to afford the people more freedom and less censorship.

In 2005, Khamenei, afraid of a repeat of the Khatami ordeal, used his considerable power to ensure that none of the reformist candidates were elected. Instead, he opted to support the candidacy of a hitherto marginal figure named Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But from his days in college, Ahmadinejad had established close ties with young Islamists who would later become leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), and of its shady Qods Brigade. In his populist campaign for presidency, Ahmadinejad promised to fight corruption and improve the economic lot of the people. Double-digit unemployment and inflation had by then taken their toll on the people. The failure of the reformists to deliver on their political or economic promises prepared the ground for Ahmadinejad's victory.

Once in power, Ahmadinejad surprised everyone, including Khamenei by the strength of his tightly knit network of Iranian Revolutionary Corps of Guards (IRCG) commanders, and leaders of Basij--gangs cum militia that have units in every neighborhood and office around the country. Ahmadinejad's willingness to use these hard-line ideologues to replace well-trained managers and technocrats resulted in a massive purge of the bureaucracy. Many of these replaced managers joined the ranks of the government's critics, if not opponents.

Most importantly, in spite of record oil revenues (more than \$200 billion in Ahmadinejad's tenure) Ahmadinejad not only failed to solve any of the economic problems or fight corruption but made them both worse. In fact, some of his closest allies--like Minister of the Interior Sadeq Mahsuli, who was a founder of the Qods Brigade--were themselves notoriously corrupt.

As the 2009 presidential election neared, Ahmadinejad seemed more and more vulnerable and the reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi gained unexpected momentum. Green became his color and suddenly major cities were covered in a sea of green. A large and powerful coalition of forces, ranging from Ayatollahs Montazeri and Rafsanjani to moderate secular forces,

members of the middle class, women's group, trade unions, student organizations, technocrats and leaders of Iran's badly beleaguered private sector was formed around the issue of ridding the country of Ahmadinejad. The fact that for several months before the election Khamenei had clearly sided with Ahmadinejad made a vote against the incumbent president a "no" against the status quo. In reality, the election became a referendum about Khamenei and his allies.

As early as Monday June 8, the IRGC, in its official political organ called *Sobhe Sadeq*, warned of what it called a "Velvet Green revolution" in Iran and declared, menacingly, that they will nip in the bud this movement and will never allow it to seize power. By Friday, no sooner had the polls closed had Ahmadinejad and his co-conspirators put caution to the wind, and preemptively declared him the winner. They were clumsy in their announcements. Each candidate's share of the total vote remained more or less the same throughout the night—statistically impossible considering the differences in support amongst different segments and strata of society. Moreover, in anticipation of public uproar, the coup masterminds announced a large "security exercise" where they took over Tehran in a massive show of force.

Even before the end of the vote count, the general contour of the coup was evident, and Khamenei's role was particularly telling. Instead of remaining above the fray and meeting the winner about three days after the results are officially announced, he hurriedly issued a statement supporting the election result and asked all other parties to join the celebration. He was clearly one of the masterminds of the coup. Now, his fate is inexorably tied to that of Ahmadinejad. Moreover it is not clear to what extent he can continue to count on the obedience of the IRGC or even whether he has become their subservient tool.

What the coup masterminds miscalculated were the resolve of the people and of Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi to resist the brazen electoral coup. Ever since the announcement, there have been ceaseless peaceful demonstrations. Mousavi has asked his followers—by several accounts more than 22 million votes were cast for him—to continue their peaceful demonstrations and to refuse to accept what he calls the baseless claims of victory by Ahmadinejad. He has also written an official letter of protest to the Guardian Council, asking it to declare the election null and void and order new elections. In spite of the government attempt to shut down phone and instant messaging services, and in spite of the arrest of more than 150 activists—and finally, in spite of the brutality of the regime's forces in restoring order—peaceful resistance has continued.

It is now up to the international community, particularly the U.S. and countries in Europe to side with the people of Iran. The key to nuclear impasse, too, lies in helping the people of Iran create a more democratic government.

Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, where he is also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.