

ABBAS MILANI

Persian Politicking

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is not just a buffoonish figurehead, but part of a larger power struggle within Iran. We dismiss him at our peril.

AHMADINEJAD: THE SECRET HISTORY OF IRAN'S RADICAL LEADER

BY KASRA NAJI • UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS • 2008 • 312 PAGES • \$24.95

For three decades, it has been evident that the Islamic Republic of Iran is, and will remain, a “problem” for U.S. policymakers. In the past, when the United States faced such geopolitical challenges, millions of dollars in grants and scholarships were made available for the scholarly study of every aspect of the challenging country or ideology; just consider the spread of institutes for Soviet studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Even then, strategic blunders were not always avoided.

But for reasons that are hard to fathom, in the case of Iran, the reverse has happened. Only after September 11 did top universities begin to launch or adequately support programs in Iranian studies, and even then it was invariably at the initiative of the Iranian-American community. The scarcity of seasoned Iran scholars has forced the U.S. government and the media to rely on either Iranian

ABBAS MILANI is the director of the Iranian Studies Program at Stanford University, a visiting professor in its department of political science, and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

expatriates, each with a political ax to grind, or Western journalists who had become Iran “experts” by dint of the few days or weeks they spent in the country, invariably at the mercy of their government “handlers.” That is why a book like Kasra Naji’s *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran’s Radical Leader* is useful. His command of both “local” and “global” knowledge—necessary ingredients for adequate reporting from countries like Iran—and his mastery of the Persian language have made him a rightfully acclaimed journalist.

Ahmadinejad offers a brief history of the rise of the clerical regime through the prism of a political biography, following the Iranian president from his childhood in a poor and pious family to his stunning 2005 presidential election. His victory underscored the continued existence of a radical, intransigent faction within the regime, a faction that pines for a confrontation with the United States. But such a close study of the Islamic regime’s history also reveals a more moderate faction that has tried to find a peaceful solution to the nuclear impasse, as well as a seasoned, but now dormant democratic movement in the country. For all Ahmadinejad’s extremes, any U.S. policy that isolates and weakens the moderates and marginalizes the democratic movement—and talk or reality of war does both forcefully—is counterproductive for the United States and Israel and helpful to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The focus of *Ahmadinejad* is less the private life of the man, or the quirks of his character, than the political developments in Iran since the 1979 revolution. We learn much about Ahmadinejad’s political creed, but next to nothing about his private life (other than occasional snippets, such as his aides’ unchallenged claims that “he works 20 hours a day”). His relations with his wife, children, friends, and family remain *terra incognita*. Moreover, the book is weak on sources. To be fair, the scarcity of sources about a subject like Ahmadinejad partially arises from the realities of Iran—a despotic regime where documents are kept secret or used as a political weapon, and where talking to journalists can be dangerous. But when tackling thorny issues about Ahmadinejad’s past, this dearth of reliable sources becomes a serious problem.

Nevertheless, there is enough supportable evidence to develop a solid picture of Ahmadinejad’s political life. As Naji rightly argues, during the early years of Iran’s war with Iraq (1980-88) Ahmadinejad made “contacts with the early founders” of the Revolutionary Guards, links he kept up through his political rise. Naji shows that all of Ahmadinejad’s electoral victories—from his election as the mayor of Tehran to the presidency—were in no small measure the result of the support he received from these Guards. Likewise, he relied heavily on the *Basij*—the millions-strong gangs-cum-militias who control virtually every neighborhood and

institution in Iran—to get votes and intimidate the opposition. The work of these two groups sometimes proved too effective: In one district, the number of votes cast for Ahmadinejad far exceeded the population of the district itself.

The two groups have, in turn, profited greatly from the Ahmadinejad presidency. His administration is filled with past members of the Guards. Moreover, during his three years in office, in spite of his constant railings against nepotism, these commanders and the companies they established have garnered billions of dollars in no-bid contracts. “Every year up to 6 billion dollars worth of goods were imported illegally through the unofficial ports” controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, Naji writes. Ahmadinejad, like much of the nation, is aware of these ports but has done nothing about them.

Likewise, the Basij have been amply rewarded for their support. They were made an official part of the government bureaucracy, one of Ahmadinejad’s campaign promises, and their budget has increased 200 percent this year. In June 2008 alone, they received more than 3,000 no-bid government contracts. Their ability to use nearly free labor and their access to raw materials at “special” prices have made them, like the companies owned and operated by the Revolutionary Guards, the nemesis of the private sector. As Naji points out, a command state-dominated economy, in the style of the now defunct Soviet Union, is Ahmadinejad’s economic ideal, and in some ways becoming Iran’s reality.

Despite his ability to dole out political favors, Ahmadinejad faces many obstacles in bringing about his desired economic and political changes. In Iran today, power is at once diffused and centralized; the regime is not unlike a feudal monarchy, where different clerics or cliques have a fiefdom of their own, with Ayatollah Khamenei as the “monarch,” or leader, perched on top. Yet it is an unstable hierarchy, with multiple poles of influence. No one is all-powerful, not even Khamenei; the presidency, in particular, has little formal power in the system.

Though Ahmadinejad gets the most press internationally, he is far from being the most important political figure in the country. In fact, it is impossible to understand Iranian politics and his role in it without assessing the interplay of Khamenei and former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who lost to Ahmadinejad in 2005. Ahmadinejad is the president, but the Iranian constitution places most power in the hands of unelected mullahs. Most of the key strategic decisions are made by these clerics, and it is there that Rafsanjani and Khamenei each have key roles to play.

The two men had worked amicably during Rafsanjani’s first two presidential terms (1989-1997). But only a few weeks before the first round of the 2005

election, one of Rafsanjani's sons told an American journalist that if elected, his father would turn Khamenei's job "into a ceremonial position like the king of England." And, as Naji points out, days before the election Khamenei made it clear to members of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij that his candidate of choice was Ahmadinejad. Khamenei was trying to derail the Rafsanjani candidacy, though his efforts were less ideological than self-interested: Khamenei had worked masterfully for 18 years behind the scenes to consolidate his place in the Iranian regime. When, in 1989, he was chosen successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, he had neither the political gravitas nor the clerical seniority of the man he was replacing; the constitution even had to be amended to allow for his appointment. By all accounts, Rafsanjani played a crucial role in shepherding through the requisite constitutional changes. Lest anyone forget this crucial fact, on the eve of the 2005

The Bush policy of talking to Tehran in secret while publicly dismissing the idea of any such talk strengthened Iranian hardliners.

election, Rafsanjani released the part of his *Diaries*—of which several volumes have since been published—chronicling Khomeini's last hours, and the process for Khamenei's anointing. The message was clear: Rafsanjani was the king-maker. Which meant that the real story in 2005 was not so much Ahmadinejad's rise as it was Khamenei's effort to show

he was now powerful enough to act independently of Rafsanjani.

But there were also ideological reasons for the rift. Aside from Khamenei's political greed in expanding his personal power, he had a tendency to side with the more radical wing of the regime, while Rafsanjani's well-known financial greed coincided with his advocacy of a more moderate policy toward the United States. The presidential election of 2005 brought these simmering tensions to the surface.

Rafsanjani is nothing if not a survivor. In spite of constant attacks by Ahmadinejad and his allies calling him the "Godfather" of "the economic mafia," the resilient Rafsanjani has managed to get himself selected president of the powerful Council of Experts, a body of 86 clerics entrusted with the task of "electing" the next Spiritual Leader. Rafsanjani, in other words, is in a key position to be a king-maker once again, even a king. Rafsanjani's survival also undercuts the theory, common among some Iran-watchers, that Ahmadinejad's victory finally completed Khamenei's control of all three branches of the government.

Khamenei may also become a victim of his own success. The constitution affords him vast areas of control: the judiciary, the military, the national television and radio organization, the intelligence agencies, the Basij, and Revolutionary

Guards. He also controls about 40 percent of the entire economy through his oversight of the “Bonyads”—foundations created when most of the big industrial and financial companies of the *ancien regime* were nationalized. The most powerful of these is the Bonyad Mostaz’afin, or the “Foundation for the Dispossessed.” Since its inception in the early days of the revolution, the Foundation has been invariably led by members of the Revolutionary Guards and has been notorious as a den of mismanagement and corruption. In late June, 2008, Khamenei took the unprecedented step of allowing the Foundation to henceforth sell part of the country’s oil in the international market. Hitherto, sale of the country’s oil has been a monopoly of the state oil company, where some measure of oversight and financial accounting is in play. The decision gives the Revolutionary Guards a direct share of the oil revenues and is a clear sign of their rising power, power that Khamenei may not be able to master for long. How much the Guards will push for a bigger share of power, how this power grab will affect the authority and control of clerics like Khamenei and Rafsanjani, and to what extent the Revolutionary Guards will unite with Ahmadinejad in their push for more power is arguably the most important set of questions regarding Iran’s domestic scene.

Nor is Ahmadinejad to be counted out. As Naji shows in some detail, shortly into his term, the president, helped by a small coterie of sometimes shady characters and supported by the more radical elements of the clergy and the Revolutionary Guards, began what he called “A Third Revolution.” The rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979 was, he claimed, the first revolution, and Ayatollah Khomeini called the hostage crisis the “Second Revolution.” Now Ahmadinejad wants a third revolution, in both the domestic and international policies of the regime, one that would solidify the radical aspects of the state in the economy, society, and politics. To implement this new revolution, he has replaced thousands of the country’s top managers, diplomats, and bureaucrats; placed his allies in key positions; and made other power plays to show that though he is an ally of Khamenei, he is not simply his minion. His surprising base of support among the Basij and Revolutionary Guards has made him a faction of his own, with far more actual power than the constitution grants the formally marginal post of the president.

Though Iranians often amuse themselves these days with jokes about similarities between President George W. Bush and Ahmadinejad (“they both won office in stolen elections, they both speak directly to God, and neither speaks English”), the parallels between the two men’s respective worldviews are, in fact, crucial to understanding the current impasse between their governments. Both see themselves standing athwart history, making world-changing

decisions. If American unilateralism grew out of the view that the United States is the sole superpower and must seize the moment to put its stamp on the world scene, then Ahmadinejad's adventurism and intransigence is no less the result of a dangerously flawed appraisal of the waning powers of the United States and Israel. Iran, in his view, has a unique leadership role to play in this new world order, and to claim it Iran must be aggressive and uncompromising.

Ahmadinejad may be a populist who is dangerously ignorant of the most basic laws of economics, but he also has an insatiable appetite for the gaze of the media. His calumny in denying the Holocaust and his calculated and constant jibes against Israel and its right to exist have turned him into a dangerous clown in the West but something of a folk hero in many communities around the world. According to a recent survey, Ahmadinejad is, after Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah and Bashir Assad of Syria, the most popular political character in the Arab world.

Naji provides a sobering account of the motley crew of devout aides who help shape Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and feed his megalomaniacal ego. One compares him to Socrates, another calls him the "miracle of the millennium." Even more grotesque is Naji's detailed, hitherto-little-reported account of the neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, and pseudo-scholars who were invited by Ahmadinejad to Tehran for a global gathering of Holocaust deniers. Naji calls it a "circus," and a "rogues' gallery." And yet, ironically, such shameful acts, which may have raised his profile abroad, have weakened Ahmadinejad's domestic standing. Many in the regime blame his anti-Israeli rants for the fact that Germany, France, England, China, and Russia joined the United States in passing three U.N. resolutions against Iran. Even more damaging to his power has been his failure to use the windfall from skyrocketing oil prices to solve the problems of the Iranian economy. As a result, there are already several viable candidates lining up to challenge him in the next year's election.

Recognizing his own vulnerability, in late June 2008 Ahmadinejad took a page out of the presidential campaign of his rival Mehdi Karubi. In the 2005 presidential election, Karubi received a sudden and substantial bump in the polls when he declared that if elected, he would arrange for every Iranian to receive a monthly check from the government. Now Ahmadinejad is suggesting that his government will begin to bypass middlemen and companies that receive government subsidies and instead give each citizen, each month, their share of the petro-wealth—just one instance in which Ahmadinejad has used "public resources" for his own political and electoral ends. And it seems to work: His aides claim that during one visit to the oil-rich province of Khuzistan—where the United States and Arab states of the Persian Gulf have apparently tried

to fan the flames of Arab nationalism amongst Arab-speaking Iranians of the region—Ahmadinejad received close to one million hand-delivered letters, each asking for some cash, a loan or a job.

Ahmadinejad's antics and Iran's nuclear ambitions have, not surprisingly, become an important part of the current presidential campaign in America. As the race for the White House heats up, and as the Bush Administration increasingly uses the kind of incendiary rhetoric about Iran that five years ago presaged the invasion of Iraq, World War II and Nazi era references are much in vogue. Charges of "appeasement" and "naïveté" are hurled against Obama for his declared willingness to directly negotiate with the Iranian regime.

In fact, the Bush policy of talking to Tehran in secret while publicly dismissing the idea of any bilateral talk has been at least partially responsible for strengthening Iranian hardliners. The ineffective embargo helps the regime internally by giving them an excuse for their economic failures, while American saber-rattling provides ammunition for the get-tough foreign policy of Ahmadinejad's faction. In fact, the threat of a military confrontation with Iran also dangerously harmonizes with two key elements of Ahmadinejad's peculiar form of pious messianic populism: his belief in the inevitable military confrontation between the Islamic regime and the United States, and his faith that such a conflict is divinely inspired. A bloody apocalypse is, according to certain Shiite religious texts, the immediate precursor to the return of the Savior. Ahmadinejad even believes, as Naji chronicles, that the messiah provided him a protective halo when he was visiting the United Nations, and accuses the United States of conspiring to delay the rapturous return of the Mahdi. (More recently, Ahmadinejad claimed that the United States tried to abduct him during his last visit to the Iraq. But once again, just like the U.N. "halo," no one else noticed this aborted abduction). He even regaled the nation with the good news that the messiah has in fact been managing the daily affairs of Iran's economy.

There is a predictable interplay between regime-embarrassing developments at home and face-saving international tensions. During the last weeks of June 2008, a now-controversial talk given by Abbas Palizrad, an official of the Islamic regime, was leaked to the press. He chronicled massive financial corruption among at least 44 of the top leaders of the regime—including nine of the most senior clerics. With galloping inflation, double-digit unemployment, and a massive flight of capital from Iran, the regime seemed headed to a perfect economic and political storm. But then, beginning with Israel's simulated attack on Iran's nuclear sites, the issue of internal corruption gave way to preparation for war, and the regime was able to recover its footing. Unconditional negotiations with

ABBAS MILANI

Tehran, on the contrary, would heighten already existing internal tensions and weaken Ahmadinejad and his allies.

Naji's short biography provides a helpful guide for navigating the treacherous labyrinth of Ahmadinejad's Bosch-like mind. It shows him to be paranoid, populist, messianic, and apocalyptic, but with a systematic and opportunistic mindset. He is a politician easy to demonize and mock. But he is nevertheless the president of Iran, and his worldview shapes a significant part—though not the entirety—of Iranian domestic and foreign policy. Understanding how he will, and will not, shape Iran's future is essential to preventing his more apocalyptic visions from becoming reality. ▀