

Iran's

Presidential (Re)elections

Who are the candidates?

Iran's tenth presidential elections since the 1979 revolution are scheduled for June 12. A candidate must receive 50 percent of the vote to win in the first round. If this threshold is not reached, a runoff is held one week later between the top two vote-getters.

This year, only four candidates were permitted to run by the Guardian Council: current president **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** (age 52), former prime minister **Mir-Hossein Mousavi** (age 67), former speaker of the parliament **Mehdi Karroubi** (age 72), and former Revolutionary Guard commander **Mohsen Rezaii** (age 55).

All four are well-known figures in the Iranian political establishment. The three opposition candidates have criticized

question Mousavi's progressive credentials. During his time as prime minister (a position which was abolished in 1989) he was considered socially traditional and politically cautious, advocating a socialist economy and "third-worldist" foreign policy. He lacks Khatami's charisma and has not shown himself to be a particularly enthusiastic or inspiring campaigner.

Ambivalence about Mousavi has led some reformists to throw their weight behind **Mehdi Karroubi**, the only cleric in the race. While underestimated, Karroubi cannot be counted out. Had it not been for improprieties, he would have likely finished in second place in the first round of Iran's 2005 presidential elections, behind Rafsanjani and ahead of Ahmadinejad. He can be both a maverick and

Setting the Scene

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Ahmadinejad's economic, foreign, and nuclear policies, vowing to take more measured and prudent positions.

An architect by training, **Mir-Hossein Mousavi** is considered Ahmadinejad's strongest challenger, thanks in part to the endorsement of popular former president Mohammed Khatami. One of the few politicians in Iran with a reputation for being a competent manager, Mousavi is credited with keeping the economy stable during the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war.

Mousavi may have the broadest constituency of any candidate. He appeals to the urban middle classes, professional elite, and youth who have chafed under the economic populism and political and social restrictions of the Ahmadinejad era. Aside from the support of Khatami, Mousavi's wife, former university chancellor Zahra Rahnavard, has proven an effective asset in helping to attract female voters. And as the only ethnic Azeri candidate (Azeris constitute around a quarter of Iran's population), the backing of the northern province of Azerbaijan could play a decisive role.

Although he's running on a reformist platform, some

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an economic populist, considered one of a small handful of Iranian politicians willing to voice his disagreements with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. His age and temperament call to mind an Iranian John McCain.

In many ways Karroubi has taken bolder reformist positions than Mousavi, pledging to free political prisoners and abolish the Guardian Council's ability to reject candidates (though neither are likely achievable in the near term). If the 2005 elections are any indication, Karroubi can count on winning his home province of Lorestan, in central Iran, as well as pockets of voters in the provinces who are attracted to his economic policies, which attempt

¹ The Guardian Council is an unelected body of 12 jurists that have the constitutional authority to veto parliamentary decisions and vet electoral candidates. Supreme Leader Khamenei directly appoints six of the members and indirectly appoints the other six.

to mix populism and capitalism. As the only clergyman running, Karroubi can be expected to get sizable support from Iran's religious elite, though the fact that he is a cleric may steer even more voters away from him.

The only candidate with little chance of winning is highly ambitious former Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) commander **Mohsen Rezaei**. His support base comes from hardliners disappointed in Ahmadinejad and elements within the Revolutionary Guards, as well as his home province of Khuzestan. Intimidating in appearance and lacking in popular appeal, reformists are happy to have Rezaei in the race, believing he can take some of the votes from Ahmadinejad in the first round. While Rezaei himself has long been considered a hardliner—indeed, he is one of six people wanted by Interpol in connection with the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina—vis-à-vis Ahmadinejad some of his positions on foreign policy and economic matters appear progressive.

Though **Ahmadinejad** has profoundly mismanaged the economy—Iran's 30 percent official inflation rate is one of the highest in the world—the incumbent has never been defeated in a presidential election since the advent of the Islamic Republic. What's more, Ahmadinejad's campaign has access to state funds, gets favorable coverage from state TV, and has the ostensible backing of the Supreme Leader. For all of these reasons, he remains the candidate to beat.

Recognizing that his primary constituency is pious lower income voters, Ahmadinejad has eschewed urban sophisticates in Tehran and elsewhere—whose voter turnout is usually lower—and instead made more visits to the provinces than any Iranian president in history.

How democratic are these elections?

It depends on your metric. Iran's system is more democratic than many countries in the Middle East, where elections either don't take place or the results are a given. In truth, however, Iranian elections have the unique combination of being unfree, unfair, and unpredictable.

They are not free because only a small group of candidates—those deemed sufficiently loyal to revolutionary ideals—are permitted to run by the Guardian Council. Considering all the people prohibited from running—women, religious minorities, liberal Islamists, secular candidates—a majority of the population is immediately excluded.

They are not fair because even after the pre-rigging takes place, there are various ways that regime higher-ups, particularly Khamenei, can attempt to manipulate the outcome. In 2005, for example, the *bassij* and elements of the Revolutionary Guards were mobilized behind Ahmadinejad's candidacy. The preferred candidate of the

Leader often has access to additional campaign funds and gets preferential treatment from official state television, still the primary source of information for most Iranians.

After voting takes place, accusations of fraud—ranging from ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and the cancellation of votes—are not uncommon, although they are not thought to be carried out on a massive scale. After Mehdi Karroubi narrowly finished in third place to Ahmadinejad in the first round of the 2005 presidential elections, he wrote an open letter to the Supreme Leader alleging various improprieties, including, among other things, that Khamenei's son Mojtaba intervened on behalf of Ahmadinejad.

This time around there is a great deal of concern about the fairness of the elections, given they are carried out by the Interior Ministry (whose head, Sadegh Mahsouli, was appointed by Ahmadinejad) and supervised by the Guardian Council (whose chairman, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, declared his support for Ahmadinejad). Ali Reza Alavi-Tabar, an astute reformist strategist, argues that if the reformists want to win, they would need an additional 5 million votes to compensate for any potential vote rigging by hardliners.

All that being said, Iranian presidential elections are often unpredictable. In 1997 few predicted the victory of Mohammed Khatami, just as in 2005 Ahmadinejad was considered among the least likely victors.

Has the Supreme Leader endorsed Ahmadinejad?

Khamenei will never come out and publicly endorse a presidential candidate. It's important for him to project the façade that Iranian elections are free and democratic and a reflection of popular will, and that he is simply the country's magnanimous guide who stays above the fray.

That said, Khamenei's recent recommendations to the public regarding the type of candidate they should select certainly bear more of a resemblance to Ahmadinejad than any of the other candidates. He implored people to elect "those who live a simple and modest life, who are acquainted with the problems and sufferings of other people and who have avoided extravagance." This is precisely the image that Ahmadinejad likes to project of himself.

In response to the opposition candidates' criticisms of Ahmadinejad's bellicose foreign policy, Khamenei said in a recent speech that, "the Iranian nation will face a disaster if those who flatter the West and the Global Arrogance [i.e. the United States]—instead of treading the path of Imam Khomeini—come to power."

Khamenei is also known to have had contentious relations with all three of Ahmadinejad's opponents. When he was president in the 1980s Khamenei frequently butted heads with Mousavi and Rezaei, when the former was prime

minister and the latter head of the Revolutionary Guards. And he issued a strong public rebuke of Karroubi in 2005, after the latter's allegations of electoral misconduct.

How do the Iranian people view this election?

The general trend in Iran over the last several years has been one of popular depoliticization and dejection. The euphoria which many people in the United States feel now for Barack Obama, Iranians felt for Mohammed Khatami in 1997. People turned out in droves to vote for him; he inspired hope. After eight years of Khatami's presidency, however, unfulfilled expectations dampened civic participation.

When I was based in Tehran during the June 2005 presidential elections, many people with whom I spoke, especially in urban areas, had come to believe that voting in Iran was at best an exercise in futility, at worst a vote of legitimacy for the regime. "*Cheh farghi mikoneh?*" ("What difference does it make?") was a common refrain heard in Persian.

While it remains to be seen, I suspect that many people who didn't vote in 2005 now realize that it does make a difference who is president. During Ahmadinejad's tenure the people's economic lot has generally worsened, and their social and political freedoms have contracted.

While none of the three opposition candidates has been able to inspire the type of excitement generated by Khatami, Mousavi in particular may receive many votes driven by fear of an Ahmadinejad re-election, rather than a great desire to see a Mousavi presidency.

The reformists believe they need a high turnout to win, to ensure a second-round run-off against Ahmadinejad. They're assuming that Ahmadinejad will reach his peak vote count in the first round.

Interestingly, Khamenei also implores people to vote in large numbers, believing a high voter turnout underscores the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic (he often lectures the United States by saying voter turnout in Iran is higher than in America). Voters in Iran get their ID card stamped, and there are widespread rumors—especially in the provinces—that not having your ID card stamped could be professionally detrimental, given that a majority of Iranians are still employed either directly or indirectly by the state.

Given that Khamenei is the most powerful official in Iran, does it really matter who wins?

It's true that the constitutional authority of the Supreme Leader dwarfs that of the president. He controls the

main levers of state, namely the military, the judiciary, and the media. Khamenei's power base has also expanded considerably over the years as the country's most important institutions—the elite Revolutionary Guards, Guardian Council, presidency, and parliament—are all currently led by individuals who were either directly appointed by him or remain unfailingly loyal to him.

That being said, the president is widely thought of as Iran's second most powerful man. He chooses important cabinet positions and helps sets the tone on economic and foreign policy. He is also the most visible Iranian official both domestically and internationally.

When it comes to major issues, such as the nuclear portfolio and relations with the United States, Khamenei will continue to have the last word, but he makes decisions by consensus rather than decree.

When visualizing how decisions are made in Tehran, I picture fifteen bearded men sitting around a long table, with Khamenei seated at the head. While Ahmadinejad is president, all of these men will share a similar anti-imperialist, revolutionary Islamist disposition. But the election of a more moderate president could change the makeup of who sits at that table. Instead of fifteen hardline voices, you could have five or six people advocating less strident domestic and foreign policies. Their impact won't be enormous, but it would not be negligible.

How might an Ahmadinejad victory affect the Obama administration's engagement efforts?

Ahadinejad's continued presence would serve as a major—I fear insurmountable—obstacle to U.S.–Iran confidence building. In the context of domestic U.S. politics he pushes the worst possible buttons; his diatribes toward Israel and his Holocaust denial make it far more difficult for any U.S. administration to acquiesce on Iran's enrichment of uranium.

Is it possible that Ahmadinejad could take a more progressive stance in his second term? The last four years have shown that Ahmadinejad is not someone prone to introspection or self-doubt. While not messianic, he is both delusional and incorrigible.

Continuing to engage Iran—basically trying to open a sustained dialogue with Tehran—is the right thing to do, even if Ahmadinejad is elected. But if by the end of the year the Obama administration has not seen its overtures reciprocated by Tehran, it will be politically difficult for the administration to continue justifying its engagement approach.

What should the United States do or not do in the lead-up to the election?

The best thing the United States can do is simply stay out. U.S. officials should refrain from commenting on the Iranian campaign and certainly refrain from expressing a preference for any particular candidate. The Obama administration understands they should wait and see what happens.

Any predictions?

It's never a good idea to try to predict Iranian elections, but if you look at the country's politics over the course of the last 30 years, you notice several broad trends in terms of the influence of individuals, groups, and themes that may offer some insight for the future.

The first decade of the revolution was one of revolutionary excess and radicalism. The individual focus was on Ayatollah Khomeini, the group focus was the clergy, and the themes were revolution, war, and martyrdom. The end of the war with Iraq, followed by Khomeini's death, ushered in a new era. From 1989 to 1997 the individual focus was on President Hashemi Rafsanjani, the group focus was Islamic technocrats, and the theme was post Iran–Iraq war reconstruction.

Nearing the end of its second decade, disillusionment with the revolution became widespread. The “children of the revolution,” who had reached their late teens and were chafing under the Islamic Republic's political austerity and social restrictions, helped usher in a new era of reform. From 1997 to 2005 the individual focus was on reformist President Mohammed Khatami, the group focus was the student movement, and the theme was democracy and civil society.

By the end of Khatami's term, regime higher-ups—namely Ayatollah Khamenei—were deeply concerned that abandoning revolutionary ideals could send the Islamic Republic the way of the USSR. This, coupled with the Iranian population's yearning for economic deliverance, provided fertile ground for a new movement meant to kill these two birds with one stone. From 2005 to present, the individual focus has been on populist President Ahmadinejad, the group focus has been on the Revolutionary Guards, and the theme a return to revolutionary roots.

It could well be that the costs of Ahmadinejad's economic mismanagement and foreign policy adventurism may compel the Islamic Republic to correct itself once again and usher in a new era which focuses on competent management and economic growth. If the last three decades are any guide, however, corrections have usually tended to take place after two presidential terms are served, not one.

About Karim Sadjadpour

Karim Sadjadpour is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He joined Carnegie after four years as the chief Iran analyst at the International Crisis Group based in Tehran and Washington, D.C. A leading researcher on Iran, Sadjadpour has conducted dozens of interviews with senior Iranian officials and hundreds with Iranian intellectuals, clerics, dissidents, paramilitaries, businessmen, students, activists, and youth, among others.

He is a regular contributor to BBC World TV and radio, CNN, National Public Radio, and PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, and has written for the *Economist*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *New Republic*.

Frequently called upon to brief U.S. and EU officials about Middle Eastern affairs, he has testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, given lectures at Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford Universities, and has been the recipient of numerous academic awards, including a Fulbright scholarship.

Sadjadpour was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in Davos, and is a board member of the Banu Foundation, an organization dedicated to assisting grass-roots organizations that are empowering women worldwide. He has lived in Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East.

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