



BULLETIN

No. 35 (35) • June 18, 2009 • © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Bartosz Cichocki,
Mateusz Gniazdowski, Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor),
Łukasz Kulesa, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

Presidential Elections in Iran: Internal and International Context

Piotr Krawczyk

With the Iranian opposition contesting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election in the 12 June 2009 vote, the legitimacy not only of the president, but of the whole system of governance could be undermined and the radicalization of public sentiments could follow. So far the protests have not threatened the regime, but if the claims of the opposition are disregarded, continued protests could spark violent political processes. Whether the election returns have been tampered with or not, the announcement of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory calls into question the possibility of an effective dialogue between Iran and Western states.

Post-election Internal Situation. According to the official voting results, the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who represents the fundamentalist fraction, received 63% votes—to 34% of votes cast for his major rival, the reform movement leader, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. As soon as the voting closed—even before the results were formally announced—Iran's leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei commended the high turnout (85%) and supported Ahmadinejad. This did not stop either Mousavi, who had scored much higher in most pre-election polls (up to 60%, which, theoretically, would have safeguarded him victory already in the first round), or the other two contenders, Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsan Rezaei, from contesting the election results.

The opposition accuses the authorities of electoral fraud and claims that the incumbent used public media and budget funds in his campaign. On 15 June Mousavi and Karroubi called for the cancellation of the election and for a re-run. The Guardian Council, which is responsible for overseeing elections, announced an investigation into protests and a repeated counting of votes. In Teheran Mousavi supporters staged massive demonstrations.

So far the system of government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has relied on a balance among different factional groups: fundamentalists, conservatives, reformists and pragmatists. They have all had the opportunity of sharing in government, with the Rahbar—the Supreme Leader of the State—arbitrating political disputes and ensuring the balance of power. In addition, the partly-democratic system of election of some institutions (e.g. the parliament and the president) enhanced the ability to keep social discontent in check and preserve the cohesion of the system, while protecting the Republic from having its legitimacy questioned.

The election of Ahmadinejad in 2005 disturbed this model. The fundamentalist faction has been increasingly monopolizing power and the impact of the security services and the military (in particular of the Revolutionary Guard, the elite military formation) on the state has been growing ever since. Ahmadinejad's confrontational and populist policy, which has polarized the society and sharpened political divisions, prompted the renewal of a broad coalition of the gradually marginalized reformists, pragmatists and a president-resenting part of the conservative faction. In their campaigns the two reformist runners (Mousavi and Karroubi) and the moderate conservative contender Rezaei shared a rallying cry for unseating the incumbent. The extremely aggressive electoral campaign rang with charges of corruption, abuse of power and nepotism. The opposition blamed the president for the deterioration of the economic situation¹ and for Iran's growing international isolation. The unprecedented scale of accusations and threats has sapped the authority of the prevailing order. The elec-

¹ P. Krawczyk, "Internal and International Implications of Iran's Economic Crisis," *Bulletin* (PISM) No. 30 (30), June 1, 2009.

toral rivalry was a sign that the consensual model of Iranian policy has outlived its usefulness. If Ahmadinejad's victory was indeed due to a rigged election, this would be something new—for in earlier elections, presidential and parliamentary alike, no conspicuous vote fraud occurred.

Regardless of whether the authorities acknowledge the opposition's electoral fraud claims, or stand by the original results, a fundamental change of the shape of political life in Iran looms ahead. The admission of fraud (if fraud there was) would strike at the foundations of the system—at the Rahbar, who expressly backed Ahmadinejad. By taking the side of one of the contestants Khamenei undercut his role as an impartial arbitrator. If the results giving victory to Ahmadinejad stand, this will not persuade the opposition to stop contesting the outcome of the election. Far from that, the opposition will manifest its dissatisfaction more and more bluntly (the massive scale of recent protests, in which about 1 million Iranians have participated, lends credibility to this thesis), forcing the authorities to step up repressions—in which process the military and security services will be strengthened. That will bring down the curtain on the democratic dimension of the Iranian system.

The parties and political groups which have to date functioned within the Republic will find themselves outside the system, a position bound to lead to their radicalization. Although at present the opposition is incapable of threatening the authorities, the deepening frustration of the political segment of the establishment and society in Iran, combined with potential mass protests over economic issues (the Iranian economy is in danger of collapsing in the second half of the year), will pose a grave threat to the stability and, indeed, to the very existence of the present regime.

International Dimension. Since the beginning of his term U.S. President Barack Obama has been declaring his willingness to change relations with Iran by launching direct talks on the nuclear program and on the role of Iran in the region. Yet it appears that USA's advance announcements of the start of diplomatic talks might have actually contributed to the present crisis. First, President Ahmadinejad used them in his electoral campaign as proof of the effectiveness of his uncompromising and confrontational foreign policy, thus possibly increasing his support among a part of the electorate. Second, the Iranian authorities received a message that the U.S. would deal with any winning candidate—an attitude reflecting the U.S. administration's belief that strategic decisions in Iran are taken by the Rahbar rather than by the president. Signals of that kind could have suggested to the Iranians that the American side, focused on the success of future talks, set no great store by the manner of conducting the election and would not raise objections to voting irregularities, if any. Possibly, this additionally emboldened the authorities to rig the election.

It seems unlikely that, with Ahmadinejad re-elected, an effective U.S.-Iran dialogue can be launched. Given Iran's mounting social and economic problems and the weakened legitimacy of the government, the authorities could opt instead for the continued use of confrontation with the outside world as a means of securing public support. Moreover, President Ahmadinejad's views will be driving Iran to adopt an unyielding attitude towards diplomatic overtures over the nuclear program.

It is to be doubted that attempts to start a dialogue directly between the U.S. authorities and Ali Khamenei, over the Iranian president's head, could be effective. Much as the Rahbar's position has been enhanced in recent years, he cannot make strategic decisions on his own. Khamenei has been more and more entangled in a web of interdependencies with the present president. Ahmadinejad's strong position calls into question the Rahbar's capacity for taking decisions the president might not endorse.

The election of Mousavi, while not offering a guarantee of a fundamental and immediate breakthrough in Iran's relations with the U.S., would trigger a slow shift away from Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policy. The nuclear program being one of the central elements of Iranian policy, Mousavi would not be able to modify it in a fundamental way (even though under the reformist president Mohhamad Khatami Iran had discontinued the enrichment of uranium and had voluntarily implemented the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which allows for unannounced inspections). The nuclear program issue would have been subject to special oversight, because Mousavi, whom Ahmadinejad accused during the election campaign of acting on the inspiration of foreign powers, could not—even if he became president—take decisions that would support his rival's allegations.