Backgrounders

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Iran's reform movement
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Backgrounder

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1. Executive Summary
With the exception of an uptick in protests during Ashura, Hossein Mousavi’s challenge to the Iranian political establishment has faded from the international spotlight since the open dissidence of last June. However, Iran remains a society divided. This backgrounder covers the people and events that are shaping Iran’s reform movement.

2. A History of Division

The country-wide protests that gripped Iran in the wake of last June’s disputed elections mirror political animosities that have existed for some time. There has long been a political tug-of-war unfolding between reform-minded, left leaning clerics and their conservative counterparts, ever since Grand Ayatollah Montazeri was passed up to succeed the late Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 [1]. Since then, the fortunes of Iran’s reform movement have ebbed and flowed; from the highs of Seyed Mohammad Khatami’s presidency between 1997 and 2005, to the lows of Mehdi Karroubi’s bitter loss to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the disputed elections of 2005 [2].

In fact, the Guardian Council’s powers over the selection of candidates and vetting of election results- a responsibility that proved decisive in the fallout of the disputed 2009 elections- originated from an earlier round of political conflict between conservatives and reformers. In 1991, then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani pushed hard for a reinterpretation of the constitution. He eventually succeeded, making absolute loyalty to the Supreme Leader a prerequisite for political candidacy. He was motivated by the need to head off what he saw as a nascent alliance between Ayatollah Montazeri and ‘radical’ elements in the Iranian parliament [3].

Any analysis of the conflict between Iran’s reform movement and the political establishment should keep in mind that the dispute is anything if not new. It is not strictly an ideological conflict, but a political one as well. Both sides can be expected to seize upon religion and the historical tradition of the Islamic Revolution to legitimize their cause and try to
win the hearts and minds of the Iranian people, and by extension, a greater share of political influence.

3. Key Figures in the Reform Movement

Hossein Mousavi

Hossein Mousavi has come to be regarded as the leader of Iran’s reform movement, and as such his name is now synonymous with reform. This is half deserved, for he now seems more than willing to bring the fight to the highest levels of the Iranian political establishment. However, Hossein Mousavi’s past record and political beliefs are hardly what one would expect of a radical reformer.

Mousavi was as a prominent figure during the early years of the Islamic Republic, and an ally of the late Ayatollah Khomeini. He served as Prime Minister, and his tenure from 1981-1989 produced several policies that clash with his current ‘reform’ brand. These include: restarting Iran’s nuclear program, supporting the takeover of the American Embassy, and being the figurehead of a government that did not tolerate dissent [10].

The death of Supreme Leader Khomeini in 1989 robbed Hossein Mousavi of an important political ally, and he clashed hard with the Khomeini’s new right-wing successor, Ayatollah Khamenei. When Hashemi Rafsanjani took over as President in July 1989, the office of Prime Minister was abolished. Mousavi found himself on the outside looking in and subsequently faded from politics until he made his return to run in the 2009 elections.

Mehdi Karroubi

Mehdi Karroubi, founder of the National Trust Party, has been a prominent figure in Iranian politics since the 1979 revolution. The son of a cleric, he studied under Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and was a disciple of the late Ayatollah Khomeini [2].

Karroubi’s record is more in keeping with what the reform movement has come to symbolize, at least within the international media, so much so that he has been branded with the nickname, ‘the Sheikh of Reform [2].’ He has frequently extended support to the victims of government violence and repression, with a notable exception during the 1988 crackdown which brought about Ayatollah Montazeri’s fall from grace. At that time, Karroubi broke with Montazeri and fell in line with the government [2].
Mehdi Karroubi is an outspoken opponent of the Guardian Council’s high levels of control over Iranian elections [11].

Karroubi ran for president in 2005 but finished third behind Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hashemi Rafsanjani. Afterwards, he alleged that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Basij militias had been mobilized to garner support for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad— an allegation that was also corroborated by Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Grand Ayatollah Montazeri

Hussein-Ali Montazeri rose from a peasant background to eventually study under Ruhollah Khomeini in the holy city of Qom. Later, Montazeri became a key figure in the 1979 Islamic revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini’s heir apparent [12].

In 1989, Ayatollah Montazeri strongly protested the mass execution of political prisoners and the Islamic system in Iran—a move that caused Ayatollah Khomeini to strip him of his heir status and replace him with a middle-ranking cleric, Ali Khamenei, as the next Supreme Leader of Iran [12]. Though Ayatollah Montazeri was placed under house arrest from 1997 through 2003, he remained a vocal critic of the political establishment, even going so far as to issue a fatwa condemning the government [13].

His death is no small blow to Iran’s reform movement, which will be hard-pressed to find another ally with the commitment or religious authority that Ayatollah Montazeri commanded.

4. Crisis Timeline

June 13 – Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wins election with 63 percent of the vote; Mir Hossein Mousavi comes second with 34 percent.

June 14 – Hossein Mousavi asks Guardian Council to annul election.

June 15-16 – Thousands take to the streets in Tehran and beyond, seven protestors killed. Authorities ban foreign journalists from covering the protests.
June 19 – Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issues warning that reform leaders will be responsible for bloodshed if protests continue.

June 20 – Riot police deployed to disperse protestors.

June 23 – Guardian Council rules out annulment of the poll. Riot police and Basij militias continue to struggle to contain mass protests.

June 28 – Several local British Embassy staff detained and subsequently paraded as evidence of foreign involvement in the protest movement.

July 5 – Iranian cleric group defies Ayatollah Khamenei by publically declaring that the presidential vote was invalid.

July 17 – Clashes break out in Tehran once again after former President Rafsanjani declares Iran to be in crisis.

July 20 – former President Mohammad Khatami calls for a referendum on the legitimacy of the government.

July 29 – Mehdi Karroubi drafts a letter to former President Rafsanjani alleging sexual abuse against protestors in detention.

August 1 – Trial of prominent moderate figures begins.

August 26 – Ayatollah Khamenei declares that he does not believe the reform movement had foreign backing.

September 8 - Mehdi Karroubi’s Tehran office is raided- documents, discs, and other materials are taken.

September 18 – Tens of thousands protest in Tehran and other cities on Quds day. Top reform movement leaders participate despite warning from Supreme Leader Khamenei. In many places, police forces just stand and watch.
October 24 – Basij militia attacks and injures Mehdi Karroubi while he attends Tehran’s press exhibition.

November 4 – Tens of thousands take to the street in Tehran during the state holiday of 13th Aban. Hossein Mousavi banned from leaving his home.

December 7 – Large-scale University protests to commemorate Student Day.

December 19 – Grand Ayatollah Montazeri dies.


December 28 – Government declares martial law in Najafabad, birthplace of Ayatollah Montazeri.

[4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11]

End Notes


