Presidential Elections and Nuclear Policy In Iran

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The Iranian presidential election will take place on June 14. It will mark the end of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency, which was notable for controversies surrounding his second-term election and the tightening of the international community’s backbreaking and unprecedented sanctions against the country, leading to the devaluation of Iran’s currency.

As the election approaches, many observers inside and outside Iran have begun speculating on the impact of its outcome on the country’s nuclear program and on Tehran’s negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the six countries collectively known as the P5+1—China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. No major event is likely to occur in the nuclear negotiations until the end of the election process and possibly the next president’s inauguration.[1] Yet, this election cycle has a more intimate connection with the nuclear issue, not only by virtue of its impact on domestic politics and the country’s economy, but also because former nuclear negotiators and decision-makers are running for office.[2]

After Ahmadinejad was first elected president in June 2005, he immediately gained a great deal of attention for his contentious statements on foreign policy and other issues. Notable among these statements was his denial of the Holocaust, which drew considerable criticism at home and abroad. This belligerent approach to foreign policy starkly contrasted with that of his predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, who undertook to promote “dialogue among civilizations.” Ahmadinejad’s presidency also coincided with the end of Iran’s uranium-enrichment suspension. The suspension had gone into effect in 2003 during Khatami’s presidency, and enrichment was officially resumed in 2006 with Ahmadinejad in office. Although many see Khatami’s presidency as marked by détente with the West and Ahmadinejad’s as marked by the nuclear crisis, the idea of resuming enrichment was already looming under Khatami.[3] Regardless, since then, Iran has embarked on a journey to master the nuclear fuel cycle, which Ahmadinejad has supported and promoted.

Ahmadinejad was re-elected in June 2009 after a vigorous presidential campaign that mobilized people from different ends of the political, social, and economic spectrum. The opposition contested the results of the elections, leading to nationwide protests that later became known as the Green Movement. In spite of the dispute, which led many to believe that Ahmadinejad would not be able to sustain his presidency for a four year-term, the sixth president of Iran is now in his last months in office.

What Has Changed Since 2009

In the spring of 2009, an Iranian public eager for change became more invested in domestic politics than it had been since the first election of Khatami in 1997. Many of the millions of Iranians who closely followed the campaigns of the four candidates for the presidency—Ahmadinejad, Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi, and Mohsen Rezaie—were dismayed by the declared outcome of the elections. The subsequent protests and the resulting government crackdown led to the greatest crisis of legitimacy for the Islamic Republic since its inception in 1979.

The 2009 pre-election period was dominated by an openness the generation growing up under the Islamic Republic had never truly experienced in the country. Some of the slogans chanted by campaigners questioning the regime’s Islamic nature, including “freedom, independence, republic,”
which was the secular version of the 1979 Islamic Revolution’s slogan of “freedom, independence, Islamic Republic,” had been unthinkable just weeks earlier.

This open environment allowed a generally alienated Iranian constituency to take part in the pre-election public debate, which included discussion of issues such as the country’s controversial nuclear program. Officials’ open criticism of the direction the country had taken was perceived as a green light for everyone else to express opinions different from those endorsed by the government without fear of persecution. That election cycle also marked the emergence of the country’s nuclear program into the public realm. This was mainly due to Ahmadinejad presenting himself as the champion of the country’s “obvious right” to pursue nuclear energy. He ran on this very slogan, while opposition candidate Karroubi questioned Tehran’s nuclear policy in light of the country’s increasing isolation. In widely watched presidential debates, Karroubi argued that Ahmadinejad’s policies and reckless rhetoric regarding the nuclear program, the Holocaust, and the West were making Iran increasingly isolated.

Since those elections, the landscape of Iranian domestic politics has changed, and so has the place of Iran’s nuclear program in the public debate. Indeed, the nuclear program is increasingly associated with the regime’s very existence, and support for it seems to have decreased.[4] The regime itself has become increasingly delegitimized at home and isolated internationally. Many Iranians, including some who supported the nuclear program in 2009, now believe the price they are paying for it is too high.[5] This is the case even within the regime, where a growing faction views the nuclear program as too costly for the country. Last year, members of the opposition expressed the need for a reformist stance on the nuclear program, and former Interior Minister Abdullah Nouri suggested the current crisis had to be overcome by holding a referendum on the nuclear program.[6] The discussion ended after the issuance of a statement by one of the branches of the Green Movement in October 2012 calling for a referendum, as it was clear that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would not approve such a referendum.[7]

The only voice currently heard in Iran on the nuclear program is the official one of the regime, that of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, who continue to have the same outlook on the nuclear issue despite their diverging views on many other issues.[8] The new president will have to pay deference to these views even if he does not necessarily agree with them. This is reflected by the candidates’ stances on the matter, which, although different from one another, all recognize Iran’s “obvious right” to the pursuit of nuclear energy. Even those who have criticized some aspects of Iran’s strategy for the nuclear program in the past are unlikely to change it substantially if elected.[9]

The bitter aftertaste of the 2009 presidential elections and the crackdown on the Green Movement suggest the current election cycle will be very different from the previous one.[10] Another indication is that regime officials have said that reformists’ candidacies would be rejected by the Council of Guardians, which is composed of 12 jurists who approve or reject presidential candidates before they can be elected through universal suffrage.

Many Iranians have decided to boycott the elections because they now oppose the regime, not just the current government. For months, the reformist camp shared this view and had stated it would boycott the elections, but Khatami and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani decided to become involved, the latter by announcing his candidacy and the former by supporting it.[11] Others do not see a light at the end of the tunnel and are too disillusioned with the system to take action. In contrast to 2009, the general view seems to be that the elections will not change the status quo. Many people are preoccupied with the looming threat of a war with Israel and the United States. Meanwhile, four years after the 2009 elections, the leaders of the Green Movement, Mousavi and Karroubi, remain under house arrest, and news of arrests and deaths due to the postelection protests continues to surface.[12] Furthermore, although the Green Movement is no longer as vocal as in the year following the 2009 elections, it continues to play a role in this election cycle. Indeed, Rafsanjani has been a controversial figure within the regime for his endorsement of the Green Movement. Although some see this involvement as an indication that he can use his status to play a positive role in solving the current crisis, others have criticized him for it.[13]

Moreover, the sanctions are having increasingly severe effects across the country. Some recent developments, such as shortages of medicine, are reminiscent of the years following the Iran-Iraq
war. Therefore, the presidential election in Iran is unlikely to generate extensive popular support for the next president.

Social issues played a prominent role in the 2009 elections, but in this year’s election, the economy will play a greater role at the expense of issues such as human rights. Indeed, in 2009, Rezai, whose campaign was mainly based on economic reform, was widely criticized for ignoring social issues and civil rights.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the regime, the Iranian public has been very dynamic in the past 34 years, in many instances constraining the regime from implementing Islamic law to the extent its leaders would have wished. After the 2009 presidential election and the crackdown on the Green Movement, however, this dynamism started to die out. The change is due in part to the economic difficulties resulting from international sanctions and the Iranian regime’s mismanagement of the economy and resources, as people are preoccupied with meeting their daily needs instead of trying to influence policy and fight for human rights. Other factors are the closed climate in the country and the threat perception resulting from the narrative of conflict coming from Israel and the United States. Hence, many in Iran are no longer striving to influence policy as they were in 2009. This is especially the case because Iranians increasingly are coming to the conclusion that the regime gives its interests precedence over those of the country and that presidential elections are a masquerade aimed at legitimizing the regime rather than a national debate over national interests.

The supreme leader’s absolute power manifests itself especially in the context of nuclear decision-making. According to Mousavi Lari, Khatami’s interior minister, the nuclear dossier has been under the direct supervision of the supreme leader since the beginning, as has been the country’s broader foreign policy.[14] Indeed, although factions within the country would not be opposed to negotiating with the West on the nuclear program, Khamenei does not seem to be willing to compromise. In fact, Khamenei’s official website recently compiled a list of 10 reasons for the “Iranian nation’s historical combat against the United States” as a response to increasing calls among officials suggesting negotiating directly with Washington.[15] In his annual Nowruz (Persian New Year) message, Khamenei invited Iranians to stand strong against the “enemy,” both “politically” and “economically.”[16] This means that he does not plan to alter his stance on the current crisis in the upcoming year, implying that the presidential candidates as well as the public must follow his lead. The presidential elections are unlikely to have a great impact on the nuclear crisis unless Khamenei comes to the conclusion that, in order for the regime to continue existing, it needs to change the course of its nuclear policy.

Candidates’ Nuclear Stances

Although the general consensus remains that the ultimate decision-maker in matters relating to foreign policy and Iran’s nuclear program is the supreme leader, the positions held by various presidential candidates are of interest. This is the case because the principal domestic advocate for nuclear energy in the country has been Ahmadinejad. He championed this position, which is likely to continue with his successor. The general consensus in the country’s ruling class and presidential candidates lies in the Iranian nuclear program’s tagline “nuclear energy is our obvious right.” Most candidates further insist that the West’s worries are unfounded.

Two factions can be found in the list of candidates. The first supports the idea that Tehran should not change its stance on the nuclear issue regardless of international pressures, while the second hints at an approach that is more open to compromise.[17]

The first group includes Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Saeed Jalili, and Ali Akbar Velayati.

Adel,[18] a former chairman of the Iranian parliament, has stated that the country’s stance on the nuclear issue should not be changed because it is not “illogical.”[19]

Jalili, known in the West as Iran’s chief negotiator on nuclear issues, is the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, which plays a key role in the country’s nuclear policy. His views are in line with those of Khamenei. Thus, if elected, Jalili would reinforce the regime’s current position on the nuclear program and ongoing negotiations. Jalili has stated that the nuclear issue is a nonpartisan
matter, “a national consensus,” directly linked to Iran’s national interests and that uranium enrichment, “whether to 5 percent or 20 percent, is part of our nation’s right” under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty [20]

Velayati, a former foreign minister, has reiterated this stance, stating that Iran’s “obvious right” to nuclear energy will inevitably have to be recognized. He has further claimed that Iran’s nuclear program is in accordance with its international obligations and thoroughly verified by the IAEA. Furthermore, Velayati said that even when Iran decided to suspend enrichment, the West “found a new excuse” because it fundamentally rejects Tehran’s “natural right” to nuclear energy. In fact, “enrichment is our obvious right, and under international law, it does not matter whether it is 20 percent or 50 percent, and they [the West] wanted to determine the level of enrichment for us, but they had to surrender, and the 20 percent enrichment is for the Islamic Republic of Iran to decide.”[21] Velayati has noted that the overall regime stance on the matter has been consistent with Khamenei’s. Velayati’s position is likely to be in line with the supreme leader’s.

The second faction, which supports more flexibility on Iran’s part includes Rezai, Manouchehr Mottaki, Hassan Rouhani, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, and Rafsanjani.

Rezai, the commander in chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq war, allegedly was involved in the planning of the 1994 suicide bombing of the Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. As noted above, Rezai’s 2009 campaign was based primarily on economic reform. He did not have a large base of supporters in 2009. Rezai’s current stated position on the nuclear issue is that, in addition to the ongoing negotiations, there needs to be a dialogue opening the door for what essentially would be a win-win solution, such that “we do not lose and [other countries] do not think there is a threat to the world from us.”[22]

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Mottaki has said that Iran has a winning hand in the ongoing crisis and should “bring up scenarios in which, on the one hand, the Iranian nation’s right [to enrichment] is confirmed and, on the other hand, the other party can feel like it has achieved something. Right now, in the nuclear discussions, we are not seeking to destroy world imperialism.”[23]

Hassan Rouhani, the head of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005 who resigned following the election of Ahmadinejad as president, is well known in policy circles in the West, but is essentially an unknown figure to the general public. In his memoir, National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy, Rouhani described the negotiating team’s efforts under his supervision, as well as what he characterizes as the shortcomings in Iran’s nuclear diplomacy. He says that “some countries have oppressed the Iranian nation by sending Iran’s case to the [UN] Security Council and pressuring the country via sanctions.”[24] Yet, he also criticized Ahmadinejad’s diplomatic tactics, blaming him for the economic sanctions and international isolation.

Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, Ahmadinejad’s chief of staff and head of the secretariat of the Non-Aligned Movement, is a controversial figure in Iranian politics. The regime’s conservative political establishment has criticized his nationalist stance, which it views as contrary to the Islamic Republic’s values, placing Islam above everything else and frowning on nationalism. He does not seem to have Khamenei’s approval. Mashaei has gone so far as to state that Iran is a friend to the nations of Israel, which is not recognized officially as a country by the Islamic Republic but rather is referred to as the “Zionist regime” in official discourse, and the United States, a statement that was indirectly criticized by Khamenei.[25]

On the nuclear issue, Mashaei has highlighted the role of confidence-building measures, stating that the country would “invest in the nuclear field” with other states, but that Tehran has never received clear answers on what constitutes such measures from the P5+1. Hence, he maintains that confidence building is an excuse to stop Iran from mastering the nuclear fuel cycle and that even when Tehran voluntarily suspended enrichment activities, the country was not provided with any assistance. He has further asserted that the “use of peaceful nuclear energy and the continuation of negotiations nationally and internationally are important to the Iranian nation.”[26]

Rafsanjani, the chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council (see sidebar, p. 18) and president of Iran from 1989 to 1997, is a highly controversial figure in the country. He is seen as extremely
corrupt, having accumulated a great deal of wealth since the revolution. Nevertheless, he maintains some popularity among the opposition, as he is seen as one of the most powerful figures to have openly criticized the outcome of the 2009 presidential elections. He has supported Iran’s right to the “peaceful use of nuclear energy in the context of the IAEA’s legal framework.” He also has claimed that Khamenei’s fatwa on nuclear weapons is superior to any “political promise” and maintains the regime’s position that the West and Israel are “plotting” against Iran.

Nevertheless, he has argued that the building of trust requires efforts from both sides in a negotiation. He has blamed Israel for promoting a situation that is “in neither party’s interest,” as both the P5+1 and Iran would benefit from mutual trust, the removal of the sanctions regime, and expansion of their relations.[27]

Conclusion

The Iranian presidential election and its aftermath are likely to be different from the previous election cycle, which led to a broad civil society movement. Furthermore, the presidential elections are unlikely to have a great impact on the country’s approach to nuclear policy, as the ultimate decision-maker is the supreme leader, whose responsibility is to guarantee the survival of the Islamic regime rather than ensure national interests. Nevertheless, the next president’s approach to the country’s foreign and nuclear policies is important, as he can be a stabilizing or destabilizing factor for the regime, depending on his views.

In other words, the president can either promote the regime’s official policy without questioning it or challenge it. Indeed, if the next president’s views are those of Khamenei, the regime’s unified position will be reinforced, while a president and government that are willing to compromise could add another element of disagreement to an already divided ruling class. Furthermore, a more established president, such as Rafsanjani, is likely to have more independence and therefore allow for a more flexible Iranian position during negotiations than a weak president with less popular support.

Editor’s note: On May 22, the Council of Guardians barred Rafsanjani, Mashaie, and Mottaki from running for the presidency. As Arms Control Today went to press, none of the three candidates had taken action to reverse that decision.

Political Power in Iran

There are several centers of political power in Iran. Some of the most important are summarized below.

The supreme leader is the highest political authority in Iran and the ultimate decision-maker on all domestic and foreign policy matters, including the country’s nuclear program. The supreme leader is supported, advised, and protected by the beyt-e rahbari (house of the guide), which comprises the leader’s inner circle and members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The Revolutionary Guard was established as a paramilitary organization following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Its mission was to counter the traditional military, which the revolutionaries distrusted because of its close ties to the monarchy. Today, it operates under the supervision of the supreme leader and conducts overt and covert operations at home and abroad. The guard is composed of several branches, including two entities well known abroad for their counterintelligence and covert operations in the region and beyond, Ansar al-Mahdi and the Quds Force. The Revolutionary Guard’s power relationships with the supreme leader and the rest of the political establishment, as well as its internal dynamics, are relatively opaque.

The president, who is elected every four years by universal suffrage, cannot serve more than two terms, and his power is limited by that of the supreme leader. The president appoints a cabinet, which is subject to parliamentary confirmation and the supreme leader’s approval.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly is the legislative branch, comprising 290 members representing geographic constituencies or religious minorities (Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian). Each member of parliament is elected by popular vote for four years. Legislation introduced and passed by the parliament
is subject to the approval of the Council of Guardians of the Constitution.

Six Shiite clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six lawyers nominated by the judiciary branch and approved by the parliament constitute the Council of Guardians. The council serves as a supervisory body, interpreting the Iranian constitution. In addition to approving candidates for membership in the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the council approves presidential candidates.

The Assembly of Experts is an elected body of 86 clerics, which is in charge of appointing the supreme leader. Once appointed, the assembly supposedly can replace the supreme leader if his performance is not deemed satisfactory.

The Expediency Discernment Council comprises the heads of all branches of the government (executive, legislative, and judiciary), members appointed by the supreme leader, and the six clerics of the Council of Guardians. It serves as an advisory body to the supreme leader.

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ENDNOTES

1. The election is due to take place on June 14, 2013. If a single candidate does not receive a majority of the votes, a runoff will be held between the two top candidates.


4. A poll conducted by the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network asked users of its website where they stood on the Iranian nuclear program. The poll and its results were taken down, and the network issued a statement denouncing the United Kingdom’s role in “hacking” the website and manipulating the poll’s results. Sixty-three percent of the participants had voted for the suspension of uranium-enrichment activities, which was perhaps a surprising outcome to those holding the poll, leading them to taking it down. See “63 Percent of Participants Requested Enrichment Suspension in Iranian TV Opinion Poll,” BBC Persian, July 3, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/07/120703_l39_nuclear_survey_iran.shtml (in Persian).

5. The decreased popularity of Iran’s nuclear program among Iranians is visible across social media and Iran’s extensive blogosphere.


17. The selective list is current as of mid-May.

18. Khamenei’s son, Mojtaba Khamenei, is Haddad Adel’s son-in-law, which leads many to believe that he is part of Khamenei’s inner circle.


21. “‘The Iranian Nuclear Issue’ From the Viewpoint of the Potential Presidential Candidates.”

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.


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