

Iran: The Ascendancy of the Hardliners

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Iran held parliamentary elections on March 2 and will hold presidential elections in 2013. The parliamentary elections were basically a competition between conservative factions, with the reformers and the opposition Green Movement excluded from the competition. The presidential election is certain to confirm the ascendancy of the hardliners among Iran's ruling elite; and the results of both these elections will have far-reaching implications for Iranian domestic and foreign policy.

The ascendancy of the hardliners, already under way during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first term (2005-2009), was sealed in the aftermath of the controversial and contested 2009 presidential elections, when Ahmadinejad won a second term. Many Iranians regarded the election as fraudulent, and hundreds of thousands of demonstrators poured out into the streets of Tehran and other cities in protest when the implausible election results were announced. Government security forces crushed the protests with a degree of brutality not witnessed in three decades. Protesters were beaten and knifed by police and armed thugs. Thousands were arrested. There were credible reports of rape of both male and female prisoners. A number died under torture in secret prisons.

The memory of that crackdown and its aftermath—show trials, harsh treatment, long prison terms, denunciation of protestors as “secessionists”—is still vivid for Iranians, and the government has made no attempt to heal the scars and divisions left by these events. Almost three years later, hundreds of protestors, political activists, journalists and intellectuals are still languishing in Iranian prisons. Purges have taken place in the universities and other government institutions. The two leaders of the opposition Green Movement, Mir-Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, have been under house arrest and incommunicado for over a year. The two leading opposition parties have been banned.

Domestic Implications

The reverberations of these events are still being felt in Iran today. Deep divisions have emerged within the ruling establishment. The influence of the security agencies and the Revolutionary Guards in domestic politics is dramatically on the rise and palpable in all spheres of society. Iran's foreign policy posture has hardened.

The divisions within the ruling elite are evident at several levels. We should remember that the leaders of the Green Movement, now treated as political pariahs, were not-so-long-ago regime insiders. Mousavi was the much-praised prime minister during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Karroubi is one of the country's prominent political clerics and a former Speaker of the Majlis, or parliament, and a former presidential candidate. They and their movement are now labeled “secessionists.” Even politicians who failed to distance

themselves from the Green Movement or to condemn it are targeted, with some on the right suggesting they should be excluded from participation in future elections. In the just-concluded parliamentary elections, reformist candidates were hardly in evidence. Many are in prison or barred from politics. Although some reformists ran, usually as independents, the reformist parties in any case elected to boycott the elections. The Arab Spring, which many Iranians view with excitement and envy, has only fed regime fears and reinforced a policy of repression and widespread arrests.

At the same time, deep splits have emerged within the dominant conservative camp. President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, once Ahmadinejad's powerful patron, have been at odds over a number of issues. In what was seen as a bid to gain control of the powerful Intelligence Ministry, the president dismissed the minister in April 2011, but the Supreme Leader immediately reinstated him. The president, in a huff, stayed home for eleven days, but most of the powerful figures of the state, the Revolutionary Guards and the clergy failed to support him, and a humiliated Ahmadinejad resumed his official duties.

A split also emerged between Ahmadinejad and the conservative political establishment, including the majority who once supported him in the Majlis. The president managed to ruffle parliamentary feathers on many issues. He undertook major policy initiatives and appropriated money without parliamentary approval, failed to enforce laws passed by parliament and treated the legislators with near-contempt. The enmity that has developed between the president and the current speaker, Ali Larijani, is common knowledge. So deep is the split between the president and parliament that late last year there was even talk of amending the constitution so as to abolish the presidency in favor of a British-style parliamentary system, with a prime minister chosen by the majority party or coalition in the house.

The president also has alienated leading members of the clergy, who are suspicious of the allegedly unorthodox religious views of Ahmadinejad's influential chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Masha'i. Members of the president's entourage have even been accused of dabbling in black magic and consulting sorcerers and soothsayers. As long as Ahmadinejad enjoyed Khamenei's support, he also enjoyed a large degree of immunity from criticism and opposition. But once the president lost favor with the Supreme Leader, all the resentments and hostility to the president came out into the open.

Due to their role in putting down the post-election protests in 2009, the Revolutionary Guards, the security agencies and the judiciary have greatly enhanced their standing in the power structure and their influence on policy. The Guards provide the men to crackdown on protesters; the Intelligence Ministry and its spooks collect the information to bring dissidents to trial; and a pliant judiciary conducts show trials and sends dissidents and political opponents to jail.

The Guards take the view that it was they who in 2009 saved the regime from the greatest challenge it has faced since the Revolution. The price they demand in return is a greater say in domestic and foreign policy and freedom of operation in the economic sphere.

Guards' commanders now openly inject themselves into the political arena. Hardliners returned to the Intelligence Ministry and are responsible for the harsh treatment of academics, intellectuals, journalists and NGOs. The Guards, initially with Ahmadinejad's support, also have injected themselves into the economy, thanks in part to the government's award of no-bid contracts worth billions of dollars. The Guards now operate the largest single construction enterprise in the country. They operate as many as 800 companies and are involved in gas and oil extraction, pipeline construction and airport management. They operate in factories and car assembly plants, and they purchased a majority holding in the largest telecommunications company in the country and are in charge of the country's missile industry and the safeguarding of nuclear plants.

In 2009, the Guards established their own special unit to detect so-called "cybernet" crime—basically an attempt to crack down on dissent through the use of the Internet, Twitter, text messaging and so forth. The hardening in Iran's foreign policy is in part the result of the growing influence of the Revolutionary Guards and the security agencies in foreign policy decisions.

Foreign Implications

Two other factors explain the noticeable hardening of Iran's foreign policy posture over the last two years: the tightening economic sanctions it faces, fueled largely by the United States, the European Union, and UN Security Council resolutions; and the opportunity for enhanced regional influence it believes is offered by the Arab Spring. Iran initially responded to tougher sanctions not by seeking a resolution of issues raised by the European Union and the United States over its nuclear program but by greater defiance. It accelerated its fuel enrichment program, built new enrichment facilities and ignored a European offer to resume talks. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors who visited Iran twice earlier this year in effect came back empty-handed, having been denied access to key facilities. In a symbolic gesture, Iran cut off oil sales to England and France. Last November, the Iranian government allowed a mob to attack and trash the British Embassy in Tehran, leading the British to withdraw their diplomats and close down the embassy. Without mentioning Israel by name, the deputy head of the armed forces said in February that Iran reserved the right to strike first against countries that threatened Iran with military action.

By March, however, the Iranian position seemed to be softening, an indication that sanctions on Iran's banking and financial system, and an EU decision to end purchases of Iranian oil, were having an effect. Iran agreed to return to the 5+1 talks (involving the five members of the Security Council and Germany) on its nuclear program. It also invited IAEA inspectors back, promising greater access to sites the nuclear agency wishes to inspect. It remains to be seen whether these were indications of a genuine willingness to engage with the West on the nuclear issue.

The regime also tried to turn the Arab Spring to its own advantage by treating it as a movement inspired by Iran's own Islamic Revolution and part of a larger Islamic awakening. And, initially, there seemed reason for Tehran to celebrate. Arab leaders who

were allies of the United States and not friendly to Iran were overthrown. Conservative rulers on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf were under siege. By openly championing the insurgents in Bahrain and allowing individuals and media close to the government to denounce the rulers of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in the harshest terms, Iran showed once again that it valued its standing on the Arab street far more than good relations with its Persian Gulf neighbors.

However, events showed Iran's celebratory tone over Arab discomfort may be premature. Islamic parties who won large slices of the vote in Egypt and Tunisia distanced themselves from Iran and seemed more inclined to follow the Turkish than the Iranian model. The uprising against Bashar al-Assad in Syria, a major and critical ally, presented the Iranian regime with an embarrassing dilemma. It could hardly cheer on the people in the streets who were calling for their leader's overthrow, as it had done in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Bahrain. Rather, the regime took refuge in double talk, calling for respect for human rights and the people on the one hand, and denouncing calls for Assad's departure as foreign-inspired on the other. In fact, behind the scenes, Iran has assisted the besieged Syrian regime with money, equipment, and, some analysts believe, with military advisers and arms.

Moreover, a major shift is taking place in attitudes towards Iran on the Arab street. In Syria, protesters denounced Iran alongside their own leaders. Iranian support for Assad has been noted in Arab cities in the region. If the Assad regime in Syria collapses, Iran will lose its closest regional ally and the channel through which it supplies weapons and material support to its Hezbollah surrogates in Lebanon and, circuitously, to its Hamas and Palestinian protégés in Gaza. The decision of Hamas to break with Assad, who long provided support and refuge to leaders of the movement, may indicate an unwelcome trend and means Hamas is willing to thwart its principal funder and benefactor on an issue of great import to Tehran.

Finally, the government in Tehran must consider the impact of the Arab Spring on its own people. Millions of people in Arab countries protesting economic conditions, unemployment, unaccountable government, the absence of democracy, and the treatment of citizens as if they were gullible fools—and the overthrow of regimes—must surely serve as a warning. Unlike in 2009, Iranians may not go back to their homes if they come out on the streets again—this time it might be for economic, not political, reasons. The government may find it much more difficult to crush people who demand bread in addition to their rights.