

Transcript of Remarks made by Hadi Semati
June 26, 2006 – “Iran Under President Ahmadinejad”

The following remarks were made by Hadi Semati in connection with his participation in the conference entitled “Iran Under President Ahmadinejad,” which was held at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on June 26, 2006. The opinions expressed here are those of the speaker and in no way represent the views or opinions of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Most predictions about political developments in Iran have proven to be half wrong. Policy-makers and analysts are increasingly cognizant of the hazards of misreading Iran, a country with complex political machinery situated in an even more complex social and cultural environment. However, few learn the lessons and take measured steps to remedy the underlying problems for studying Iran. As we witnessed over the last year, astounded by the election of President Ahmadinejad in June 2005, observers of Iranian politics have either overestimated his influence or completely dismissed him as a player worthy of little attention. Analysts tend to fall into two categories. First, those who began casting him as a powerless character whose erratic behavior and policies would gradually marginalize him among the established statesmen of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The second group is those who have increasingly written or talked about Ahmadinejad’s rising popularity and growing power which could become a danger even to the routinized power-politics of Iran and the country’s durability. Moving between these two extremes and constructing a framework based on these assumptions has been the ultimate source of failure in coming to terms with Iran.

A more basic problem is that most people who study Iran seem to focus on players and their political orientations and the rivalry among these competing political forces. The result is usually a fluctuation between two extremes - either overplaying the role of individuals and the new faces or basically underestimating the impact of personalities of ruling individuals. Very little attention has been given to the institutional networks of Iranian politics and how the interplay between institutions and individuals actually does have a significant impact. The dynamic between these two sets of factors and issues should be brought back to the analysis, rather than having a one-sided picture and everyone, then, becoming euphoric or totally pessimistic about the developments, depending on the circumstances. The institutional development of Iranians politics provides both a fair degree of autonomy and flexibility for the actors on the one hand, and structural rigidity on the other hand. This constrains many political actors, but at the same time it leaves room for them to work out their agendas and it sets limits for what can and what cannot be done.

It would thus be more promising analytically to focus on the interplay of institutions and actors in Iranian politics. It is this nexus that permits individuals, depending on their resources, organizational capacity, charisma, and message, to manipulate the system and chart its direction. Institutions, in other words, matter a great deal. Conceiving of the Iranian political system as overwhelmingly personalistic has caused a great deal of confusion and has left analysts with unexplainable facts and events. It is true that a great deal of power is concentrated at the top of the political structure, but the fact that actors themselves exert a considerable degree of influence should not be overlooked. The interaction between institutions and personalities takes place in

constant fluidity and it is governed by a contradictory constitutional structure that creates room for politicized interpretation and, at the same time, offers some degree of popular expression through an electoral process and thus a prospect for limited political agency. That is the known secret why the IRI keeps reproducing itself repeatedly despite tremendous political upheaval that constantly positions the society against the state.

With the institutional and political context outlined above, let us turn to the actual effects of the Ahmadinejad presidency. Over the last year, Ahmadinejad's unanticipated influence on Iranian politics can be observed in five key areas. First, he unquestionably changed the guards at all levels of bureaucracy. Post-revolutionary state-building has largely involved ad hoc training and bureaucratization on a massive scale. The accumulation of these sometimes costly experiences has given the Iranian state a fair degree of proficiency and a new technocratic, managerial and political class. It is apparent that the new president and his advisors have decided and more or less implemented a deep personnel change throughout the state institutions. With the exception of a few ministries, these have exceeded expectations, often to the point of incapacitating the routine and ongoing operations of the rational decision-making system. More specifically, the change of personnel has not only deprived Iran of an incredible repository of on-the-job trained technocrats, it has also created a bureaucratic stalemate or sometimes a complete freeze of national and policy decisions. There are very few layers of bureaucracies and institutions that have remained untouched. Most of the new faces that are replacing the old guards are young, and mostly unheard of. The overall orientation of the new government to tap the younger generation of the revolution has created uncertainty and erratic decision-making, particularly in the area of public policy.

One can argue that there is now, a year after the election of President Ahmadinejad, an overwhelming anxiety within the system about the sudden changing structure of governance. The purge of the state bureaucracies, reminiscent of the early 1980s, has brought a new generation to power, one that is inexperienced in the possession of power. Moreover, these new actors are largely drawn from a very exclusive pool of the new president's loyal supporters. The new personnel dynamics have created frictions and resistance within bureaucracies. Even some traditional and moderate conservatives have raised questions and criticized the wisdom of the changes and impending political marginalization of some conservative forces. The response to the personnel change thus far has consisted of small-scale resistance from within regarding policy decisions, and political opposition from the conservative rank-and-file.

The second area in which the election of Ahmadinejad seems to have ushered in a new era is the revival of the old-style local mobilization. Of course there are serious doubts as to the efficacy of such mobilization over the long-term; nonetheless, for the present it has proven to be extremely unwise to disregard them. Local mobilization of the old style depends on the traditional means of communication and organization that use mass rallies, networks of mosques, neighborhood associations and charities, and religious procession associations to connect to the conservative constituencies. Many, in particular reformists, underestimated the utility of these traditional vehicles of political action thus undercutting their own ability to be proactive or respond to the conservative onslaught. It is evident that Ahmadinejad and his core political support within the security-military institutions have skillfully used these traditional institutional networks to advance their political cause and to organize a sizable minority of the public in

addition to their core loyal supporters. It was somewhat surprising that the messages preached by the local clerics in the mosques were very organized and top-down. Not necessarily unusual in Iran, this was done with a new political potency and utmost organizational efficiency. The message was simple with heavy political overtones drumbeating the cause of Ahmadinejad's government and how he would reinvigorate the original purity and simplicity of the Iranian Revolution. This is where we have to pay close attention, and of course reformists will have to come back and debate the much neglected backbone of the religious hierarchy in their long-term strategy. Once again, we are witnessing early indications of how traditional networks of mosques, charities, and religious institutions are currently being used for the next phase of elections and the electoral process that the conservatives will face in October later this year.

Third, and probably the most important issue, is how the rearrangement of the state bureaucracies combined with the mobilization of traditional modes of organization has created a new potency among the constituency of the conservative forces in Iran. By energizing the once-weakened constituency of the true revolutionaries, a segment of the population that basically had been demoralized by the advance of the reform movement and the erosion of basic "moral teachings" of the Iranian revolution has been resurrected. The era of the reform movement and the ensuing opening of Iranian society reinforced a deep sense of powerlessness among people who were sidelined during the latter part of the 1990s and who felt that the forces of change were leaving them behind both economically and culturally. It is absolutely critical to understand how some segments of the Iranian population, especially traditional forces, experienced the pressure of class and cultural cleavages. A universalistic language of human rights and democracy used by the reformist elite did resonate with the middle class, the youth, and a sizable share of the population, but it could not reach out to the economically distressed masses and the more devout traditional forces.

Ahmadinejad's down-to-earth demeanor and his style have re-energized most of these constituencies that were essentially dormant or had been comatose for most of the 1990s. The various forces of society that had thought the "true message" of revolution had been torpedoed by the elites found an opportunity to position themselves strongly on the national political scene, even at the cost of marginalizing part of the establishment. Perhaps because, during the Iranian revolution, a coalition of the underclass, lower class, and lower-middle class was brought together by a populist leader of a different generation, Ahmadinejad has so much appeal in the provinces and small cities today. Not that all of them have been energized by electoral excitement, rather they have found a voice that represents them. Most of his messages are actually striking a chord with the dormant revolutionaries – people who really were sidelined or felt betrayed by the IRI technocratic class and elder guards of the revolution. Ahmadinejad has captivated and reactivated segments of this population that mostly resides in the smaller cities and provincial towns, and he has continuously campaigned to connect with this constituency. The strategy has proven effective so far.

Fourth, the new populist discourse he promoted over the last year has proven to be more penetrating than most people anticipated. The discourse of equality and justice, however transitional and transitory this may be, has had a moderating and two-pronged effect. One is that it positions the reformist discourse on the defensive. If one examines the current reformist literature, most of it criticizes the reformist's own radical slogans, and how their tactics

antagonized and alienated the political establishment. The self-critique of the reformist leadership is, to a large degree, centered on the notion that they should have been much more moderate and incrementalist in their tactics. One would have expected the self-criticism of the reformists to suggest exactly the opposite—that is, that they lost the opportunity to be more aggressive in pursuing their agenda through the mobilization of their base.

At the same time, the new populism of the second revolutionary generation and the conservative revival have moderated the political discourse and agenda of the reformists. However, at the same time, the radical populist discourse and the personal success of Ahmadinejad have undermined the moderating political culture that Khatami espoused. The populist discourse has proven to be significantly more potent and powerful than anyone expected. The reformists are on the retreat and much more defensive than ever. Mainstream conservatives are sitting back and waiting to see what happens, and they do not seem to be completely incapacitated, although they are not willing to take issue with the entrenched conservative power. The battle of ideas and visions for the future of Iran and its political context are rapidly changing and has introduced a heavy dose of despair and pessimism among the elite and the public.

Fifth, I will argue that as a player, Ahmadinejad has proven to be more independent than most observers give him credit for. Many people speculated early on that he would be a mere proxy of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, essentially a puppet played out in the very complicated networks of Iran's internal politics. It is now evident that most people have come to the realization that he does have a certain degree of freedom and autonomy from major political players which he is fighting hard to preserve and expand. It is also crucial to note that Supreme Leader Khamenei has found this political matrix increasingly useful for his mediating position. By moving, sometimes recklessly, to the right of the Leader, Ahmadinejad has provided him with room and maneuverability. This has afforded Khamenei the political space to selectively withdraw from day to day affairs and to be the moderate and moderating voice of the system, sorting out the new battle of political factions that has now engulfed the conservative bloc. Ahmadinejad is also of great value as “the fall guy” at Khamenei's disposal if things go massively wrong overnight. In short, as a player, Ahmadinejad's persona has forced the opposition to sit back and wait while he has at the same time established a symbiotic relationship with the Leader that will help stabilize and consolidate the political system. It seems that the combination of the institutional charisma and power of Khamenei plus the populist persona and message of Ahmadinejad has created a very important force for some time to come.

The new political composition of the system provides opportunities and strength for the IRI which has suffered from a serious legitimacy deficit over the last few years. But, at the same time, it creates more vulnerability and possibility for corrosive fissures within the system. However, the point is that we should not underestimate the degree of this transformation and the resilient and potent political force that needs to be reckoned with. What are some of these new possibilities and fault lines of Iran's political mosaic?

Through his aggressive approach in domestic politics and often demeaning attitude towards his political rivals, Ahmadinejad has successfully managed to alienate a large part of the establishment. This includes people from the pragmatic conservative camp, chief among them Rafsanjani, and even more traditional senior clerics from Qom. Many have resisted being co-

opted into the larger political umbrella that he has forged. Various factions of the mainstream conservatives, reformists, and elder statesmen are having tremendous difficulty with Ahmadinejad and are trying to cope with the reality that he has created, notwithstanding the current lack of will and political momentum to challenge him.

Secondly, it is important to underline the fact that he has alienated the middle class and intellectuals, who were never part of his true constituency anyway. Because he recognizes their antagonism, he does not invest too much time or resources in cultivating unattainable support. This is quite obvious from the statements of his close friends and associates and advisors. Instead, he is investing his energy and political capital in the provincial cities and rural areas where he has natural support. He essentially accepts that he cannot gain any tangible support from the middle class and upper-middle class, and he holds the intellectual class in contempt. This approach will prove incredibly damaging to him in the long-term.

Thirdly, Ahmadinejad has created a massive amount of over-expectation similar to that of the reformists in the immediate aftermath of Khatami's election. His basic message, simple and appealing as it may be, has generated great hope among the public. These expectations, doomed to failure, will again lead to accumulated frustration, and the result of such unfulfilled over-expectation is anybody's guess. However, in the absence of external pressure or unforeseen events, the patience of the public will eventually wear thin again.

Fourthly, he is creating what most economists recognize as unsustainable economic growth. His economic policies are contradictory and his decisions have proven too inflationary, damaging the stability created during Khatami's period. His policies have encountered a lot of resistance among his own supporters, particularly in the parliament. Many criticized Rafsanjani in the 1990s when he launched his structural adjustment program on the grounds that any successful economic reform package requires a solid political base and a broad political coalition to support it. Rafsanjani quickly encountered intense opposition and was forced to retreat from his overall objectives. Ahmadinejad has already created massive uncertainty and sudden and erratic changes in the economy. His economic plans, or rather slogans, will not resolve the structural problems of the Iranian economy and will most certainly create political backlash. In other words, he is repeating Rafsanjani's mistake, but on a radical populist agenda. While Rafsanjani proceeded with his plans without an adequate safety net and proper cushions for the poor, Ahmadinejad is launching a populist discourse and populist economic platform that is not based on sound macroeconomic principles. It is highly likely that his ideas will prove impossible to implement and will thus be politically suicidal. However, it may be a few years before he is made to feel the repercussions, especially if he focuses on that fifty percent of the population living in the rural areas and small cities. Given the flowing oil money, it would be possible to subsidize the economy and quell the burning pressures of economic disparities. Resistance from the professional class and the impracticality of many of his economic policies would result in a patchwork of conservative and populist measures that would eventually unleash the worst of both, thus depleting his political capital.

Lastly, it is increasingly clear that the radical conservative forces that brought Ahmadinejad to power did not enjoy the full and unconstrained support of all members of the conservative coalition. In the face of personal, political, and substantive policy differences

among the conservative coalition, and given the bleak forecast of the economic situation, the unity of the conservatives will be strained. Under these circumstances, the fragmentation of conservative forces would be unavoidable. The extent of the unraveling of the coalition will largely depend on the strength and comeback potential of reformists and regional and extra-regional threats facing Iran. The more regional conflicts adversely affect Iran, the less discord we will see among the conservative coalition. The first test of this political gamesmanship and the vitality and effectiveness of the conservative coalition will come in the next two elections in Iran - the Assembly of Experts and municipality elections. Ahmadinejad has demonstrated a potential to wreck the conservative unity and alienate the seasoned leadership of the conservative camp.

What does all this mean? It seems that it is extremely difficult to change the broad contours of Iranian politics in the short-term. The complexity of factional politics and the institutional layout of the Islamic Republic of Iran do not allow much possibility for radical transformation. As it is indicative of his first year in office, in the next three years, Ahmadinejad will probably succeed in once again creating unfulfilled expectations plus institutional inertia and opposition. Moreover, as we are already slowly witnessing, the socialization of statesmanship will force many of his appointees and associates to become slightly more pragmatic, but not enough to change course completely. These new and inexperienced faces will realize the complexity of running a modern state, where slogans have very little utility and are not substitutes for sound policy. These are all key ingredients of stalemate, the quintessential trademark of the Iranian political system. Ahmadinejad cannot ride on his modest popularity for long and will need to deliver soon before disillusionment settles in. Meanwhile, reformists are waiting on the sidelines to seize a very real chance on the ruins of a failed populism. Iran is a country of second chances and they might indeed have another shot at it.