

Iran on the Eve of the Presidential Elections

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The consequence of the election depends on who wins. A reformist victory seems extremely unlikely, but if Karrubi is elected there will be a continuation of the present situation, where the president does not have an impact on policy. The presidency as an institution has been weakened under Khatami. Karrubi would not be stronger and he would be paralyzed. I do not think the economy will be revived under Karrubi. Regarding foreign policy, Karrubi would be as ineffective as Khatami.

What will the consequences of a conservative victory be? I do not think a conservative victory is likely, but there is some chance. The most likely to win of the conservative candidates is Qalibaf. There are differences in the conservative candidates, but I do not think that in practice any would be different from the others. None of them are strong enough to breathe power into the institution of the presidency. A conservative victory would also be a continuation of the present situation, given that the presidency has been neutralized. We would see continuation of populist economic policies. However, there would be one key difference in that a conservative victory would leave reformist leaders unconstrained. It would make it more likely for reformist leaders to break with the current regime and move into a stance of opposition.

I see a likely Rafsanjani victory. The circumstances of his potential victory are unclear. It may well be that this election goes to a second round. This is important because it has a bearing on the mandate he claims. When and if Rafsanjani is elected, we will see that his presidency will have two phases. The first will be a honeymoon phase, lasting two years at the most. In this period, he would be energetic and trying to do things. He would be very energetic in organizing a coalition and reaching out to reformists. We saw a honeymoon period when Khatami was elected, but things went downhill after that. I think it is inevitable that this honeymoon period will fail. I do not think Rafsanjani will be able to achieve anything for the reason that the conservatives control the other power centers. Sooner or later, Rafsanjani will become paralyzed and for the remainder of his term we will have stagnation.

How long the first phase lasts depends on a number of factors. Firstly, there is the nature of Rafsanjani's victory. If he wins in the first round, he can claim a mandate and that will embolden him. Secondly, an interesting thing to watch for is in what ways he reaches out to reformists and religious nationalists—whether he reaches out and tries to establish a populist coalition. If he does this, it will strengthen him. A third factor is whether he can achieve a quick victory after being elected. The most obvious quick victory would be to work out a deal on the nuclear issue. I doubt he would give up the fuel cycle, but there are other possibilities such as a token nuclear program. I think a deal would give him a lot of popular support and I think he could do it without the support of conservatives.

To review, the three issues that will determine the length of the first (honeymoon) period are:

1. How the election results turn out.
2. The possibility of an alliance with reformists.
3. The possibility of a quick victory on the nuclear issue.

In conclusion, I think there is a window of opportunity for the EU and the U.S. to do something on the nuclear issue. Secondly, I think it is inevitable that the conservatives will regroup and prevent Rafsanjani from doing much. In the second phase of a Rafsanjani or conservative presidency, most of the reformist leaders are likely to break with the regime. Therefore, a Rafsanjani victory would be better in some ways than a reformist victory.