

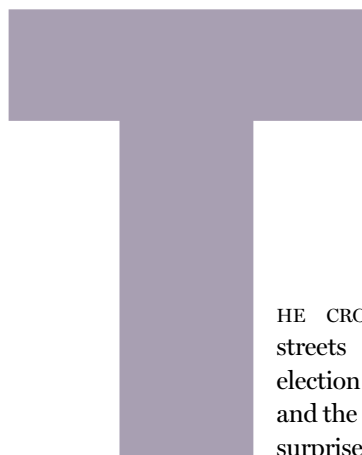
Monumental Miscalculation



IRAN ELECTIONS

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The battle of wills played out on the streets of Tehran since the presidential election is a contest for the soul of the Islamic Republic. Hard-liners may have overreached in their wish for democratic approval; public protest at the failure to protect their votes is all too evident. It is a monumental miscalculation resulting from intoxication with power.



THE CROWDS POURING ONTO THE streets in the aftermath of the election have taken both Iranians and the international community by surprise. Few, least of all those in the

hard-line ruling establishment would have predicted the extent of the anger which has gripped large swathes of society. With emotions running high and opinions polarised, it is difficult to assess reports from Iran. This has not been helped by the authorities restricting the flow of information and reporting by foreign journalists, as well as Iranians not affiliated to state organisations.

The dramatic expansion of information technology, in particular ownership of mobile phones, many of which have camera and video capability, has made such control more difficult, and the internet continues to be a source of information. The democratisation of news-gathering and dissemination at a time of heightened tension makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

But what matters now is what people believe, and in this respect the Hard-line establishment of the Islamic Republic faces the most serious crisis of authority in a generation. It is a crisis long in gestation, but in its immediate manifestation, entirely of its own creation.

To understand how a political misjudgement of such magnitude was made, we have to see this as part of a wider process with roots deep in the intellectual debates of the Islamic Revolution and its direction

STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

The Islamic Revolution and the republic it spawned has been subject to criticism, debate and discussion since its inception thirty years ago. Its short life has been a continuous struggle for legitimacy and the debate has revolved around its two pillars, Islam and republicanism.

The issue for many in the political elite was not whether the revolution was legitimate but how best to define and secure that legitimacy. More nuanced observers argued for a marriage between the Islamic and republican aspects.

How this might be achieved has always been a matter of intense debate, but the task was only seriously addressed in the mid to late 1990s, culminating politically with the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Prior to that, and while the founder of the Republic was alive, it was bound together by the charisma of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the real threat posed by the 1980 Iraqi invasion.

In the aftermath of that war, the new President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani decided the best way forward was through economic development, and little immediate attention was paid to the ideological bases of the state. Any discussion was at societal level, mainly among journalists and the burgeoning student body. This intellectual vanguard favoured strengthening the popular and democratic pillars of the state, and for many of these free thinkers it was Rafsanjani who was regarded as the main obstacle.

With the surprise election of Khatami in a landslide which took much of the conservative establishment by surprise – though perhaps not Rafsanjani who had supported him – many of these ideas were expected to be put into practice.

Like other liberal moments in Iran's history, the 1906 Constitutional Revolution in particular, the practical failures of the Khatami presidency, concealed the fact this was a seminal moment in the popular consciousness. The reformists may have failed for one reason or another but the idea of Reform had seared itself into the public imagination, not least the imagination of the Hard-line establishment which detested everything it stood for.

Such obstruction and intransigence did much to derail the Reform Movement. For them, republicanism came a very poor second to the Islamic pillar of the state, and some, such as the extreme hard-liner Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi, saw the

republican aspects of the constitution as simply a transitional means to an autocratic end. They focused their loyalties on the Supreme Leader, and encouraged the strengthening of his office so that it effectively became a shadow government.

HEAVILY ENGINEERED

The fight was bitter and at times brutal, with imprisonments, beatings and assassinations. Although Reformism had been stopped dead in its tracks, the one thing which continued to evade them was democratic legitimacy. In 2004, hard-liners campaigned for parliament in a contest widely regarded as the most heavily engineered to date.

With many reformist barred, the austere hard-liners, now called Principle-ists, swept to victory. Yet it was quite clear that they tended to do better when turnout was low. The key for them was to get a high turnout and win. The man tasked with achieving this was the hitherto unknown Mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

His populist touch and iconoclastic ideas were regarded as the perfect means to achieve the objective. His election in 2005 however was marred with controversy and while he decisively defeated Rafsanjani in the second round, it was not as dramatic a victory as Khatami – the *bête noire* of the Principle-ists – had achieved in 1997 and 2001. This time all efforts were therefore directed towards winning big.

MONEY AND PATRONAGE

Ahmadinejad possessed a number of advantages. With oil prices unprecedentedly high, he had money to spend, and patronage to disperse. If his swagger embarrassed some, a period of economic largesse would ensure any gaffes would be forgiven.

Unfortunately for the Principle-ists, Ahmadinejad proved to be a double edged sword, whose iconoclasm extended far beyond shattering the idols of Reformism. Indeed, it soon became apparent that his unorthodox religious views were at odds with those of many leading mainstream Shia clerics.

He often behaved like a bull in china shop, offending many of his closest political allies and dismissing critics with a flippancy which irked. Renowned for being incorruptible, Ahmadinejad soon betrayed all the traits of being intoxicated with power.

Indications that he was not succeeding in his primary task were revealed during the municipal elections in 2006, when his party was effectively eliminated from every council. Significantly, the turnout had

been relatively high. In contrast, last year's parliamentary election, which was heavily rigged in favour of the Principle-ists, saw one of the lowest turnouts ever.

Despite these signals, economic and political populism continued to rule, and Ahmadinejad maintained a close relationship with the Supreme Leader. Critics warned that his policies, inasmuch as any existed, were dangerously dependent on the continued rise in oil prices. When these crashed late last year, they scented blood.

Indeed the current turmoil can be traced to that moment. Prior to that most people assumed he would win by fair means, or foul if necessary. An incumbent with access to the resources of state and abundant money was going to be hard to beat. The key was to select the correct candidate and to work for a high turnout.

Ahmadinejad's challengers were assisted by the Principle-ists' need also to have a high turnout for their candidate. It was always going to be difficult to square this particular circle on the basis of past voting patterns, but there seemed to be a steady self belief in the populism of their candidate, abundant money and the ability to tweak the results if necessary.

CROWDS SWELL

Despite the economic downturn, the real impact had yet to be fully felt, and a month out, polls seemed to indicate that Ahmadinejad may be marginally ahead. But large numbers of voters, who were by inclination reformist, remained undecided. They were not immediately convinced by Musavi. But then something significant happened: Musavi and Khatami campaigned. Reassured by promises of a clean election, the crowds began to swell.

There can be little doubt, that given their history, Khatami's entrance into the campaign irritated the Principle-ists as much as it apparently provided them with the opportunity to defeat Khatami as well as Musavi. As election day loomed and private polling seemed to indicate a Musavi win, anxious Principle-ists broadened their attack, in a highly personalised fashion, targeting Musavi's backers, most obviously Rafsanjani.

Ultimately, faced with a prospective loss, radical action appears to have been decided upon. Nothing speaks to this so much as the closing down of Tehran and the widespread arrests of reformists politicians which followed Ahmadinejad's reported landslide victory.

For Iranians familiar with the tactics of the Principle-ists, fraud was a probability not a possibility. People turned out in unprecedented numbers because they were promised that their votes would be protected. It is not so much the result as the fact that they feel they have been played in what Musavi has described as a great 'charade'.

This insult to their intelligence offends them. And this goes much deeper than the facts and figures of an election, and affects members of the elite as well as the populace. Only hubris could have resulted in a political miscalculation of such enormity, the one resource Ahmadinejad enjoys in abundance.

International Events July

JULY 1 Sweden takes over rotating EU Presidency

JULY 5 Egypt hosts talks in Cairo with Palestinian factions

JULY 6 US President Barack Obama visits Russia

JULY 8 Presidential election in Indonesia

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