

Iran shaken by electoral earthquake

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JUN 16 2009

The 10th presidential election in Iran that took place on June 12, 2009 is indeed a paradigm shift in Iranian politics. Since 1979, the authority of the state has been based on Islamic and republican values. However, the way in which this election was conducted could indicate that, perhaps, a new era has begun. It can be seen as a turning point for the end of republicanism and a new beginning for a new form political factionalism. A number of parties such as the Combatant Clerks of the Islamic Revolution who are seen as “insiders” of the regime have gone as far as calling the election a coup d'état.

Even the events which took place in the run up to the election are quite unprecedented. For the first time, in the electoral history of the Islamic Republic the presidential candidates had televised debates. These debates, which were broadcast live from the state TV, crossed many “red lines” a situation which until very recently was inconceivable.

In the run up to the election, campaigns became unprecedentedly personal, and adversarial debates between high ranking people in the system galvanized their supporters, creating an overheated pre-election atmosphere. Hundreds of thousands people congregated in rallies to show support for their candidates. Most of the people who assembled in cities were the young people excited by, the prospects of reform promised by Mir-Hussein Mousavi. Although, many young people had boycotted the previous election in 2005, now after living under Ahmadinejad's strictures for four years, they were determined to use their electoral right to dethrone him.

For weeks, candidates were openly accusing each other of corruption, nepotism, favoritism, dishonesty and other forms of misconduct, which, until recently, the ruling elite denied had any roots within the boundaries of the Islamic Republic. After all, the Islamic Republic is an ideological state, based on “values” created by a revolution which was supposed to establish a “pure” Islamic State, free from corruption, depravity and immorality. For thirty years “defying” despotism and dishonesty was an ideological engine to legitimize the empowerment of the new set of religious elites who replaced the Shah. Unbelievably, the leaders of this very revolution were now blaming each other for widespread corruption and immorality.

These unprecedented events in the run up to the election encouraged millions of people, many of them first time voters, to go out and vote. Most of the pre-election polls indicated that the electoral victory was imminent for the reformist candidate Mousavi. Even the rightwing papers were predicting that a reformist government would replace the hard-line government of Ahmadinejad after the election.

However, electoral irregularities started during the election day. For example, there was a shortage of ballot papers in the constituencies that were likely to vote for reformist candidates, there were also reports of attacks on Mousavi's campaign offices and some of his representatives were denied access to the polling stations to observe the election. Both reformist candidates were alarmed by the events unfolding during the day, so much so that they attempted to see the Supreme Leader. Access was denied.

Once the polling was over millions of ballot papers were counted, amazingly in the matter of hours, and Ahmadinejad's ministry of Home Affairs declared him the winner of the contest with huge margin. Immediately, the police stated that there would be security maneuvers in the capital and they made it clear that any gathering would be

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dealt with harshly. They cut the telephone lines and text message services, most news websites belonging to the opposition were filtered and all the social networking websites such as Facebook and even YouTube were blocked.

According to the Iranian constitution, the Guardian Council is in charge of monitoring presidential elections and legally should be given three days after the polls to receive and scrutinize complaints from the other candidates. However, breaking this convention, just a day after the election, the Supreme Leader used his power to unanimously declare Ahmadinejad the winner of the contest. Without allowing any legal procedures to take place, he congratulated the president and this was only the beginning of a mounting political crisis.

In the same day, more than a hundred political activists and journalists were arrested and taken to unknown places. Despite the ban on public gatherings, tens of thousands of people came to streets of Tehran and other cities to protest about the irregularities of the election. The security forces dealt with them violently and Ahmadinejad addressed the nation and warned his rivals to accept their fate. Since the election day, Mousavi had been under pressure to accept the result, but he resisted and called the election illegitimate.

If this not a political coup d'état, this is certainly a turning point in the way power is going to be distributed in the system. Although, the existing political struggle can have many ramifications, the extreme polarization of the ruling elite is the most obvious one. This is Iranian political factionism at its peak, with the competing factions willing to resort to any action to maintain their monopoly of power in the system. They flex their muscles in any arena where it is possible to deter their rivals. They take unprecedented measures and threaten to reveal the "secrets" and the "corrupt" misdeeds their opponents have committed over the last thirty years. By doing this, ironically they compromise the ideological "values" of the revolution, which empowered them thirty years ago. It is no longer an Islamic Utopia where the enemy and the source of corruption are external; now the battleground has been shifted inside and more explicitly than ever the swords are pointed towards one another at top of the power pyramid.

Whether the hardliners can consolidate their coup and purge their rivals or the reformist, push back to reassert their rights, from now on Iranian politics is going to operate within different parameters. This presidential election is like an earthquake which sets new limits for political factionism in Iran and without any doubt, this earthquake will be followed by many aftershocks shaking the ruling structure in the Islamic State.

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