

## The genie may not go back in the bottle

Written by Reza Molavi

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REZA MOLAVI, JUN 23 2009

The official result of the Iranian election has left Iranians as well as Iran-watchers in the West baffled, disgusted and bewildered. Perhaps from the start, however, Mirhossein Mousavi was destined to fail. He hoped to combine the articulate energies of the liberal upper- and middle-classes with the business interests of the bazaar merchants. But his campaigns conducted via text messages and Facebook were irrelevant to the rural and working classes, those struggling to make ends meet, day in, day out. Although Mr Mousavi tried to appeal to them by addressing the problems of inflation and poverty, they were not convinced. And one should remember that Iranians living in the fringes of the major cities and in the villages, while not enjoying the same ability to talk to the international media, constitute a large proportion of the voting public.

Mr Ahmadinejad probably did win the election, but not by the inflated margin official results suggest. However, even taking these questionable statistics at face value, he cannot ignore the millions whose dismay has been recorded. Even in the official tallies, about 15 million people voted for someone else; the opposition estimates put it closer to 25 million, but no matter which number we go by, this is a huge number among the voting public who have expressed their displeasure with Mr Ahmadinejad and his backers.

Mr Mousavi's warning to the clergy-orientated governing elite that stealing the election would weaken the very foundation of the regime and ultimately bring about its collapse, carries weight. He is, and has been from the very beginning of the creation of the Islamic Republic, part of the political inner circle. And remember, Mr Mousavi and the other two candidates in the 2009 elections were permitted to run for the presidency only after they had been vetted and approved by the Guardian Council, which will usually carry out the Supreme Leader's wishes. The mass demonstrations yesterday clearly demonstrate that the "genie may not go back into the bottle", as Mr Ahmadinejad had predicted. It appears that the populace is no longer fearful of the police and other control apparatus. It is willing to risk all to be heard and yearns to put a legitimate system of government in place.

Mr Ahmadinejad – and those who support him – will have taken note of this utter displeasure and disgruntlement when calculating what to do next. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, may yesterday have ordered an investigation into the allegations of vote-rigging, but this is a man who at the weekend declared Ahmadinejad's re-election to be a "divine miracle". Any probe or recount into the voting anomalies will be a cosmetic affair, and will end with another declaration that the people expressed their will in record numbers through completely fair and free elections.

When this charade is over, people in Iran and the West will be well advised to move on. Given that the Iranian regime has been caught red-handed in this most precarious situation, there is a real opportunity to be seized. The US and Europe should not forget Iran's justified sensitivity to foreign meddling and the current regime's adept ability to justify its harsh repression by blaming foreign plots.

So the West should stop regurgitating the old line on lack of democracy and human rights, and focus on preparations for direct talks on the nuclear issue, on engagement and negotiations. No doubt Mr Ahmadinejad has been empowered, but the likelihood of Iran's other leaders supporting him to strike a deal with the US and the West on the nuclear issue should increase.

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The Iranian leadership understands the dire straits it is in and fully appreciates it must start addressing the rampant inflation, unemployment and the acute need for direct foreign investment in the oil and gas industry. The chances are that the timing is right, for once, to get the current regime to respond honestly and transparently.

It is the contention of this writer that, once the gates have been flung open to foreign visitors and once investments and sanctions are lifted, the sheer volume of exchanges and the avalanche of contracts, compounded by the mismanagement of resources we are seeing Mr Ahmadinejad to be so capable of, will drive him and his cohorts from power.

Time is of the essence. The Western powers will do well, if they get over the shock of the elections and move on to the next chapter.

*Reza Molavi is an Iranian national and director of the Centre for Iranian Studies at Durham University. This article originally appeared in The Independent and is republished here with permission of the author.*

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