

AFTER THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: TURMOIL AND THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

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In Iran, 30 years have passed since the Ayatollah Khomeini-led revolution in 1979. The massive national protest movement which stemmed from widespread suspicions of electoral fraud in the presidential election of June 12, 2009 could deal a decisive blow to the Islamic state of Iran. "The beginning of the end", as Professor Masayuki Yamauchi of the University of Tokyo precisely characterized this post-election crisis (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, July 5, 2009), could well prove to be a historic turning-point not only for Iran but the Middle East as a whole.

In Iranian society today, even a top leader such as Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei can be openly criticized. The present system of *Velayat-e Faqih* (government by jurists) headed by Khamenei faces such serious challenges it would appear to be highly unlikely that Iranian politics can return to its pre-June 12 condition. What course, then, might the political situation of Iran follow in the near future? Important clues are available from the huge national protest movement and its violent repression.

This post-election crisis has made profoundly clear that the socio-political base of the existing regime is beset by four kinds of divisions. There is, first, a division between "reformers and conservatives." Second, there is a division between the "cities and villages." Third and located at the political center is a rift between "the Khamenei group and the Rafsanjani group". And, fourth, there is a division between "Islam and a republic".

Each division bears complex meanings at the level of society. But, significantly, while President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad projected a populist image, various measures he took exacerbated the domestic divisions and raised the likelihood of social confrontations.

During his first term in office, Ahmadinejad had always considered his reelection to be a matter of primary importance. His continuation as President would consolidate and entrench the influence of the Revolutionary Guard, a staunch source of his political power. The Revolutionary Guard which had led Iran's eight-year war with Iraq that began in 1980 consistently and devotedly supported the Islamic government in various subsequent diplomatic crises. Now the Revolutionary Guard apparently feels some uncertainty when the new Obama administration of the U.S.A. has indicated its willingness to open a dialog with Iran.

President Barack Obama's appearance seems to have affected the political atmosphere in Iran to some

extent. Had John McCain won the American presidential election last November, Ahmadinejad's re-election would most probably have taken place without any trouble. That would have strengthened the Revolutionary Guard's hold on power and achieved their political objective of creating a military autocracy in the future.

It was probably Ahmadinejad's preference to dampen the domestic interest in the presidential election, have a low voter turnout, and garner an outright and undisputed victory.

For several reasons, such a scenario began to spin out of control just before the election. First, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who was Ahmadinejad's major opponent, mounted an effective election campaign that critically relied on the Internet. Moreover, the urban antipathy towards Ahmadinejad grew in the run-up to the election. About one week before the vote, Ahmadinejad participated in the first TV presidential election debate in Iran. He had hoped to recover some loss of support but his appearance might have added fuel to fire. Furthermore, Mousavi who was initially seen to be a weak candidate unexpectedly emerged as the ideal symbol of an anti-Ahmadinejad movement. Very likely, the Ahmadinejad side was sufficiently demoralized as to require electoral violations, even frauding to seal his victory.

The injustice of the election operations and results became suspiciously apparent. The released ballot results showed a similar state-by-state tally as the last presidential election. The proportion of the votes gained by a third candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, was unconvincingly low at less than 1 per cent. Finally, the Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Council of Guardians might have confirmed the result too hastily, thereby undermining not just the credibility of the election but also the legitimacy of the office of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic state.

Presently, the Iranian power structure headed by the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad combination cannot return politics to its pre-June 12 conditions. Instead, the power structure will be re-shaped according to one of the following ways – an entrenchment of a military autocracy led by the Revolutionary Guard; the resignation of Ahmadinejad as President, and the de-facto retirement of Khamenei; or a catastrophe for the Islamic Republic itself.

The first scenario would fulfill the Revolutionary Guard's intention that was originally made clear around 2005. In the past four years, the Ahmadinejad government had made full use of the abundant oil revenues to strengthen the Revolutionary Guard organization as much as possible. But since June 12, the split in the nation has widened so much it is unclear whether the Revolutionary Guard can manage the situation and retain its power.

Even if the Iranian government tries to suppress civic protests by violent means, or to hamper the

coverage of its repression by the international media, it is impossible to insulate political events in Iran from national and international scrutiny. Hence, it is very difficult to attain a situation of normalcy so long as the present regime cannot regain popular confidence.

The second scenario, then, looks more probable. If there can be a legal referendum on the election result that leads to Ahmadinejad's resignation, then at least the legitimacy of the Islamic state will be maintained. In that case, Khamenei's influence will be reduced even as he maintains some authority while moving toward an honorable retirement. If such a scenario is realized, it will move the Iranian political system in the direction of democratization and political liberalization.

Should both these possibilities be unrealizable, the remaining scenario will be political chaos and an entirely unpredictable future that cannot preclude the military intervention of Iran's neighbors, including Israel.

Leaving aside this worst-case scenario, no one can help being impressed most by the young and brave Iranians who issued strong calls for their sovereign rights as citizens, the right to freedom and democracy, and, for women, to equality with men. All this may herald a new "post-Islamic" era in Iran, the Middle East and the Islamic world.

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