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## Mousavi makes a comeback

By Mahan Abedin  
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More than four years ago, this author correctly predicted that veteran Iranian politician and former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi would run for the presidency in 2009. [1]

The elections in just over two weeks promise to be the most competitive in the 30-year history of the Islamic Republic. While predicting the outcome of Iranian elections is futile - given the country's peculiar constitutional arrangements and the volatility of the electorate - nonetheless there are numerous indications that the event will be a closely contested race between President Mahmud Ahmadinejad and Mousavi.

According to the best-informed journalists in Iran, Ahmadinejad is expected to lose, thus becoming the first president in the history of the republic not to secure a second term. But this should not be taken as a given, especially in light of Ahmadinejad's superior campaigning skills and energetic style.

A Mousavi victory will not significantly alter Iran's relations with the West (at least not in the short term), but it will likely trigger significant internal changes. Mousavi may yet become the Islamic Republic's first truly reformist leader.

### **A failed presidency**

Ahmadinejad has not only been the most controversial Iranian president to date, but he has also proven to be the most spectacularly unsuccessful. In 2005, Ahmadinejad focused his election campaign on three issues in particular: first, he championed the cause of the poor; second, he promised to fight corruption and improve government efficiency; third, he vowed to reverse the foreign policy "retreats" of the Mohammad Khatami years. He has only been successful in the foreign policy sphere, but even on that front the successes have been undermined by needless rhetorical excess and inability to consolidate gains.

While the Ahmadinejad government has taken measures to reverse some of the economic liberalization policies of the Hashemi Rafsanjani years (which hit the poor badly), these have come at the expense of the broader economy, and consequently left almost the entire Iranian middle classes scathing. Officially, inflation is running at 25%, but it is almost certainly

higher than that. The volatility in the price index of essential goods over the past four years has been unprecedented, which speaks volumes about Ahmadinejad's economic mismanagement.

The economic mismanagement is partly rooted in Ahmadinejad's cavalier presidential style, characterized by extreme populism and a disregard for protocol. The behavior of Ahmadinejad in his countless visits to the provinces is a case in point, whereby he promises all sorts of dividends and incentives to local people, without consulting local officials or even his own ministers. Numerous reports have surfaced over the past four years indicating that members of Ahmadinejad's delegation have distributed cash to local people (during provincial visits), thereby overriding the most basic protocols.

The much-heralded fight against corruption has been mired by the same cavalier approach and heavy gesture politics. While no one can doubt the sincerity of Ahmadinejad when it comes to combating corruption - his own simple appearance and demeanor is enough indication of his priorities - some of the president's constituencies and his political alliances have prevented him from pursuing this objective in a systematic manner.

While it is too simplistic to place Ahmadinejad in the conservative camp, there is no denying that it is the conservatives (with their vast economic and political clout) who have helped sustain him domestically. Ahmadinejad belongs to the ideological right of the regime, the so-called "Osoolgerayan" (which roughly translates into principlists), a loose set of political groupings that are not thought to be deeply linked to the conservatives' enormous and complex web of economic and commercial interests. Nevertheless, political and ideological expediency ties the Osoolgerayan (and other forces on the ideological right) to the conservatives.

This network of connectivity, coupled with the Islamic Republic's peculiar constitutional and institutional arrangements, makes it very difficult for the ideological right to carry through with its sincere promises to fight corruption. While corruption is a serious issue in Iran, the ideological right tends to exaggerate it, which in turn makes a real and concerted effort against the phenomenon even more difficult. To be fair, mid-level management in Iranian ministries and other governmental bodies is surprisingly efficient and clean. And the problem of overt bribery in Iran is nowhere near as bad as other countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

But there is no doubting the corruption of some senior clerics (who pull important strings from a safe distance) and their dependents. The corruption also encompasses some senior managers in government and municipalities. The problem of corruption in Iran would not be perceived so gravely, were it not for the regime's puritanical pretensions and its existential need to project austerity. If left unchecked, the widespread and deep-rooted corruption associated with some senior clerics, their children and their dependents could potentially cause a catastrophic loss of confidence amongst the Islamic regime's core supporters, with all the dire consequences that entails.

Despite the obvious constraints, Ahmadinejad could still have done more to combat corruption. His firing of senior managers (especially in the banking and financial sector) did little to combat corruption; instead it deprived the country of experienced managers. More damningly, Ahmadinejad failed to identify the real source of corruption, namely in the closed circles of unelected senior clerics and their extensions in the bazaar and the modern economy.

In the foreign policy sphere, Ahmadinejad has scored some successes. There is no doubt that his handling of the sensitive nuclear issue has been better than the previous administration. Under Khatami, Iran seemed to be making one retreat after another, without extracting any meaningful concessions from either the Europeans or the Americans. More broadly, Ahmadinejad adopted a tougher tone with the West, at a time when Iran badly needed to project strength in order to deter potential American aggression.

But the president's successes in foreign policy have been balanced by a series of mistakes and under-achievements. While no patriotic Iranian can fault his government for wanting to make inroads in Latin America (if only to antagonize the Americans), this should not come at the expense of cementing relations with countries nearer to home. At a time when so-called moderate Arab regimes have been alarmed by Iran's relentless progress in Iraq, and the Islamic Republic's enhanced involvement in the Palestinian arena, more should have been done to alleviate these fears, and thereby obstruct American and Israeli mischief in the Middle East.

More worryingly perhaps, Ahmadinejad's persona, coupled with his quixotic and inappropriate pronouncements in some international forums, has inflicted grave damage on the prestige of the Islamic Republic. On the international stage, Ahmadinejad risks being perceived as out of his depth, especially when he resorts to gesture politics and grandiose pronouncements. His presidential style overall - but especially in the international sphere - runs contrary to the highest standards in ethics and general behavior expected from the leaders of the Islamic Republic.

### **Mousavi: Peril or promise?**

Mousavi stands a very good chance of becoming the seventh president of the Islamic Republic. But if he is elected, it will be due to the public's dislike for Ahmadinejad, rather than Mousavi's campaigning prowess. Indeed, Mousavi's exposure to the media in the past couple of months has revealed him to be lacking in campaigning skills and charisma. In contrast Ahmadinejad is the archetypal political animal, energetic and commands superb campaigning skills.

But Mousavi is effortlessly wise and recent media interviews reveal that he has a profound insight into Iran's contemporary problems. Moreover, he is measured, thoughtful and a moderate in every aspect, making him considerably more suitable for the presidency than Ahmadinejad.

Much has been made about Mousavi's 20-year absence from the scene, but strictly speaking this is not true. Mousavi has been engaged in Iranian politics for the past 20 years, albeit from a distance. For much of the 1990s he was a consultant on political and constitutional matters to supreme leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, but on one occasion he is reported to have complained that he is a consultant who is "rarely" consulted.

The relationship between Mousavi and Khamenei has been subjected to a great deal of speculation. Much of this stems from the 1980s when the two men were widely reported to have disagreed on key issues. In his capacity as prime minister, Mousavi introduced a series of left-wing measures (most notably generous subsidies for the poor) largely in reaction to the socio-economic demands and consequences of the Iran-Iraq War. Khamenei (who served as president from 1981-1989) is said to have disagreed with Mousavi over some aspects of economic and foreign policy.

But there is no serious suggestion that the two men did not maintain a working relationship throughout. In any case, the passage of time has moderated some of Mousavi's left-wing economic views, and there is no suggestion that the former prime minister would want to drastically change the country's economic structures.

While Ahmadinejad is probably Khamenei's favorite, nonetheless the supreme leader most likely prefers Mousavi out of the other two candidates. Former Majlis (parliament) speaker Mehdi Karroubi has long had a strained relationship with Khamenei, and former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commander Mohsen Rezai is simply too inexperienced to be taken seriously.

The supreme leader likely appreciates Mousavi's moderation, and the fact that the former prime minister holds cross-factional appeal, mostly due to fond memories of his premiership during the difficult war years. Indeed, Mousavi has supporters across the political and ideological spectrum, making him a key unifying figure should he be propelled to the commanding heights of the Iranian government again.

Equally important is Mousavi's likely appeal to the Iranian middle classes, an important socio-economic group that has a difficult relationship with the Islamic regime. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the relationship has deteriorated, with Ahmadinejad being a subject of ridicule in many middle class homes. More broadly, Mousavi will likely pay far greater attention to skilled and experienced managers and so-called experts (in every sphere) and try to involve them in government decision-making structures.

If he is elected to the presidency, Mousavi's immediate goals should be to bring back stability to the operations of government and get to grips with the difficult economic situation. In the foreign policy sphere, he will likely endeavor to build on the successes of the Ahmadinejad administration and resist the temptation to make concessions to the West on the issues that matter: namely the nuclear program and Iran's support for non-state actors in the Middle East, in particular Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine.

But a more long-term challenge for Mousavi is how to deal with the threat of US President Barack Obama and his deceptive strategy of engagement. It is a damning indictment of Ahmadinejad's personality (if not of aspects of his foreign policy) that he seeks a face-to-face meeting with Obama, a move that would spectacularly undermine the Islamic Republic's long-standing policy of non-engagement with the United States.

More broadly, Mousavi has the potential to emerge as a true reformer in the long term, thereby fulfilling the empty promises of former president Khatami. His uncharismatic style notwithstanding, Mousavi's ability to appeal to every key constituency in Iranian society bodes well for the future. But he will need to present a strong relationship - and be prepared to alienate some people - lest he attract the same type of supporters that Khatami did; namely elements who are more interested in bringing down the Islamic Republic than gradually reforming it according to set of rational and consensual objectives.

In this critical period - with the US administration determined to call Iran's bluff - the last thing that the Islamic Republic needs is another Khatami. The key lesson from the Khatami years is that reform at home need not be accompanied by a soft foreign policy.