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The meaning of the Tehran spring

By Pepe Escobar

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It is 1979 in Tehran all over again. From Saturday to Sunday, the deafening sound deep in the night across Tehran's rooftops was a roaring, ubiquitous "Allah-u Akbar" (God is great). Then, in 1979, to hail the Islamic revolution; now, in 2009, to signify what appears to be the hijacking of the Islamic revolution. Then, the revolution was not televised; it was via (Ruhollah Khomeini) radio. Now, it is being broadcast all across the world.

Let's cut to the chase: what Iranian [presidential candidate](#) Mir Hossein Mousavi qualified as "this dangerous charade" and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "the sweetness of the election", or better yet, a "divine assessment", has all the non-divine markings of intervention by the Iranian Republican Guards Corps (IRGC). This follows President Mahmud Ahmadinejad officially gaining 64% of the vote in defeating Mousavi in what in the days before Friday's vote had widely been called as a very close race.

Scores of protesters equating Ahmadinejad with Augusto Pinochet in 1973's Chile might not be that far off the mark. Call it the ultra-right wing, [military](#) dictatorship of the mullahtariat.

This is emerging as a no-holds-barred civil war at the very top of the Islamic Republic. The undisputed elite is now supposed to be embodied by the Ahmadinejad faction, the IRGC, the intelligence apparatus, the Ministry of the Interior, the Basij volunteer militias, and most of all the Supreme Leader himself.

The elite wants subdued, muzzled, if not destroyed, reformists of all strands: any relatively moderate cleric; the late 1970s clerical/technocratic Revolution Old Guard (which includes Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mousavi); "globalized" students; urban, educated women; and the urban intelligentsia.

Even fighting a cascade of political and economic setbacks, for the past three decades the [regime](#) has always been proud of the Islamic Republic's brand of popular democracy, and its alleged legitimacy. Now the revolution enters completely uncharted territory as thousands of people have taken to the streets in protest against the result.

What will be the distinguishing features of the military dictatorship of the mullahtariat? How does the revolution recoup from a coup? A 29-year-old female journalist working in a moderately conservative Tehran newspaper spelled it out for Radio Free Europe: "Coup means that right now they're beating people in the streets. A coup means they didn't even count people's votes. They announced the results without opening the [ballot boxes](#). It was sent as a circular to the state television, which announced it. Is it so difficult for the world to understand this?"

The trillion-dollar-question regarding this new "revolutionary" situation is that as things stand, no pacifying solution can be found within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. In a nutshell, Ahmadinejad has made his power play against Mousavi and Rafsanjani. The Supreme Leader fully supported him. Mousavi and Rafsanjani, plus Khatami, need an urgent counterpunch. And their only possible play is to go after Khamenei.

As Trita Parsi of the National Iranian American Council, among others, has noted, Rafsanjani is now counting his votes at the Council of Experts (86 clerics, no women) - of which he is the chairman - to see if they are able to depose Khamenei. He is in the holy city of Qom for this explicit purpose. To pull it off, the council would imperatively have to be supported by at least some factions within the IRGC. The Ahmadinejad faction will go ballistic. A Supreme Leader implosion is bound to imply the implosion of the whole Khomeini-built edifice.

Null and void

As a prelude, Mousavi has already bypassed the Supreme Leader, sending an open letter to the powerful mullahcracy in Qom asking them to invalidate the election. Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, head of the election vote-monitoring committee, has officially requested that the Council of Guardians void the election and schedule a new, fully monitored one.

One of the stalwarts of Qom power, the moderate Grand Ayatollah Sanei, who had issued a *fatwa* against vote rigging, calling it a "mortal sin", has already declared the Ahmadinejad presidency "illegitimate". His house and office are now under [police](#) siege. Iranians eagerly expect a public pronouncement from Grand Ayatollah Muntazeri, the country's true top religious figure (not Khamenei) and a certified anti-ultra-right wing.

Even more strikingly, a group of Ministry of Interior employees sent an open letter to the chairman of the Council of Experts (Rafsanjani), the president of the parliament (Majlis), former nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, the heads of the legislative and the judiciary, and many other [government agencies](#). The crucial paragraph reads: "As dedicated employees

of the Ministry of Interior, with experience in management and supervision of several elections such as the elections of Khamenei, Rafsanjani and Khatami, we announce that we fear the 10th presidential elections were not healthy."

The Islamic Combatant Clergy Association (ICCA), close to Khatami and supportive of Mousavi, said on its website that the counting process was "widely engineered [manipulated]", and there was enough evidence to prove it. So for the ICCA, the election should be nullified.

Mohsen Rezai, who ran as a conservative and who is nothing less than a former head of the IRGC, also sent a letter to the Council of Guardians saying the election was illegitimate. This is crucial; it means a serious crack inside the IRGC - because Rezai's former subordinates are still active and will inevitably support him (he remains very influential). "Officially", Rezai had less than 1 million votes. He maintains that according to his own polls, "in a worst-case scenario I should have had between 3.5 and 7 million votes."

Even a former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ayatollah Mohajerani, went on the BBC Persian service to say the Supreme Leader was not infallible, and should be replaced in case of "dishonesty".

How it all evolved

The ultra-right wing maybe has not seen it coming this way - the urban youth of Tehran behaving like it's May 1968 in Paris. But they seem to have prepared themselves accordingly. The only question is when. Was it long-term pre-planning? Did it emerge after the televised [presidential debates](#) propelled the "green revolution"? Or was it a last-minute, cooked up in minutes, gambit?

As the election approached, an impartial observation of the Iranian presidential TV debates would signal that Ahmadinejad was virtually freaking out. The public debate in Iran made clear that what mattered most for voters was Ahmadinejad's record of economic incompetence, much more than his [foreign policy](#) tirades.

In the debates, Ahmadinejad managed to get away with fanciful figures regarding inflation and unemployment. He went into overdrive on the eve of the election, virtually accusing his three opponents of being Zionist agents. He may have calculated that a second round with Mousavi would be too risky. Ahmadinejad knew Khamenei was on his side. But it's fair to argue neither Ahmadinejad nor the ultra-right wing spectrum may have evaluated the full implication of a dubious electoral victory possibly imploding the whole system as they know it.

By the end of May, Mousavi was ahead of Ahmadinejad in Iran's 10 biggest cities by at least 4%.

Fast forward to this past Friday, when Khamenei met with Rafsanjani, the powerful, actual number two in the regime, who had warned the Supreme Leader three days earlier about the serious possibility of election fraud. Khamenei dismissed it.

Mousavi had also warned of fraud after Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad's apocalyptic, Mahdist spiritual mentor, appeared to endorse vote rigging.

Ominous signs were piling up fast. Before the election, the IRGC officially warned it would not tolerate a "velvet revolution" orchestrated by Mousavi's urban sea of green. On election day, ballot papers "disappeared" from thousands of polling places. SMS messages were blocked.

The polls closed at 10pm on Friday, Tehran time. Most main streets then were fully decked out in green. In an absolutely crucial development, the great Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf told Radio Farda how Mousavi's main campaign office in Tehran received a phone call on Saturday at 1am; the Interior Ministry was saying "Don't announce Mr Mousavi's victory yet ... We will gradually prepare the public and then you can proceed." Iranian bloggers broke down the vote at the time as 19.7 million for Mousavi, between 7 and 8 million for Ahmadinejad, 7 million for Karroubi, and 3 million for Rezai.

Then all hell seemed to break loose. Phones, SMS, text messaging, YouTube, political blogs, opposition websites, foreign media websites, all communication networks, in a cascade, were shutting down fast. Military and police forces started to take over Tehran's streets. The Ahmadinejad-controlled Ministry of Interior - doubling as election headquarters - was isolated by concrete barriers. Iranian TV switched to old Iron Curtain-style "messages of national unity". And the mind-boggling semi-final numbers of Ahmadinejad's landslide were announced (Ahmadinejad 64%, Mousavi 32%, Rezai 2% and Karroubi less than 1%).

The fact that the electoral commission had less than three hours to hand-count 81% of 39 million votes is positively a "divine assessment". Masked mobs encircled and attacked the headquarters of both Mousavi and Karroubi. By 3am on Saturday, long military convoys escorted by Basij militias on motorbikes took over the streets of Tehran, crying "Mousavi bye-bye" - the counter-coup to the green revolution's chant of "Ahmadi bye-bye". The whole thing started to feel like Tiananmen in Beijing in 1989. Or a plain and simple coup.

On Saturday, Khamenei had to go on the record to stress there was no fraud. And on Sunday, he felt he needed to re-certify the whole thing, describing the election as "an epic and ominous event".

The official breakdown of the vote had Ahmadinejad taking Tehran by over 50%. He may be popular in the rural provinces and in parts of working-class south Tehran, but not even "divine assessment" could be expected to give him more than 30% in the capital.

Ahadinejad won in the big city of Tabriz. Tabriz is in [Azerbaijan](#). Mousavi is Azeri. Azeris are an ultra-tight ethnic group, they vote for one of their own. The notion that Mousavi was beaten, four to one, in his home ground borders on fiction.

Karroubi had less than half of Ahmadinejad's vote and came in a distant second in his own hometown of Oligudarz. Karroubi not only didn't win in his home province of Lorestan, he had less votes than volunteers helping in his campaign. The first numbers on election night came from rural villages and [small towns](#) voting Ahmadinejad. Something immediately seemed to be way off when less than 1% of voters in western Iran went for Karroubi, very popular not only in his native Lorestan but also in Kurdistan.

As for Rezai, from Khuzestan, where most of Iran's oilfields are, he expected 2 million votes in his province alone. He polled less than a million nationwide. Everywhere, all over the country, Ahmadinejad got between a steady 66% and 69%, no matter the region, no matter the predominant ethnic group, no matter the demographics.

By law, the Electoral Commission must wait three days before certifying the results. Then they inform Khamenei and he gives his seal of approval. This is to prevent any "irregularities". This time, Khamenei approved the official results in less than four hours.

But could he actually win?

"Landslide" apart, a true Ahmadinejad victory would not be implausible. He could have reasonably scored something like 48%, for instance, ahead of Mousavi, and both would square off in a second round of voting. Ahmadinejad visited every Iranian province at least twice in these past four years. Deep, rural Iran has nothing to do with upscale north Tehran.

He plundered the reserve fund, full of oil money, set up by Khatami, to shower more money to pensioners and distribute more pork. Inflation skyrocketed. The working classes suffered with inflation and unemployment as much as north Tehran. But the average Iranian still seemed to be satisfied that his standard of living under Ahmadinejad was slightly higher.

Ahmadinejad turned the election into a referendum on the whole idea of the Islamic revolution. He literally enveloped himself in the flag - a crowd pleaser in a very religious and nationalistic country.

Mousavi had the urban youth vote, the urban, educated female vote, the intelligentsia vote, the upper middle class, globalized vote, and even the bazaar vote. But that was not enough. In the showdown between SMS and Facebook and the poor, rural and working-class masses - many of whom have a lot of empathy with the pious son of a blacksmith - it's fair to assume he could be the winner. But not in a landslide. Khatami had a real landslide in 2001, when he got no less than 78% of the vote (after 70% in 1997). The notion that an over 70% reformist impulse has been transformed over these past few years into a 62% ultra-right wing fervor is questionable.

See you in the barricades

The biggest winner in all this seems to be the Supreme Leader - who else? This is how it all played out. When Mousavi said in the TV presidential debates that Ahmadinejad was a disgrace to Iran's global image, he did not [get away](#) with it. The slap came via the very

influential Kayhan newspaper, very close to the Supreme Leader.

Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, went after billionaire Rafsanjani with all guns blazing, accusing him of corruption and nepotism. This still strikes a chord at the popular level, and especially strikes a chord with the IRGC.

Rafsanjani is the de facto number two most powerful player in the Iranian system, and has been so for more than 20 years now. He controls the Expediency Council and the Council of Experts (which has the power to depose the Supreme Leader). The IRGC fear him and are against him. It's no secret that those that really matter in the Iranian system are the top mullahcracy and the IRGC. (The name says it all; they are the guardians of the whole idea of the revolution. And they only respond to the Supreme Leader.)

With the Basij militia working as a kind of military cell in every one of the 90,000 mosques all over the country, and multiplying rapidly (they may number close to 13 million by now), these forces can do no wrong.

Ahmadinejad was very clever in the TV debates to equate Rafsanjani with Khatami and Mousavi. He painted them to his key constituency as a shock to the system. The system had to strike back. Game, set, match. For the Supreme Leader - the constituency that matters the most - Ahmadinejad even served the divine satisfaction of crushing Mousavi, who as prime minister in the 1980s (during the terrible years of the Iran-Iraq war) was played by Khomeini to control the power of then-president Khamenei.

Will Rafsanjani go for broke? As he prepares a Council of Experts counterpunch against the Supreme Leader and Mousavi plots the next resistance steps, the ball is now in the Iranian street's court. Much will depend on this Monday's peaceful march along Vali Asr street in Tehran and in 19 other cities, and a national strike on Tuesday, both called by Mousavi. Everyone remembers how a week ago the green revolution formed a chain down the entire 18 kilometer length of Vali Asr.

Ahmadinejad's show of force was his victory rally this Sunday - attended by a huge mass of true supporters in south Tehran, Basij in civilian dress and rent-a-mobs from all over the place. In a press conference earlier, Ahmadinejad hinted that in his second term he will be "more and more solid".

Ahmadinejad blamed the whole Iranian turmoil on foreign media - which not by accident are now being virtually persecuted by the security apparatus. The crackdown is assuming ultra-hardcore proportions. Yet the revolution continues to be broadcast to the whole world in English and Farsi, although the indispensable Tehran Bureau website was been taken down by the thought police. Riot police have fought students inside the dorms of the University of Tehran.

The Ministry of Interior is now protected by tanks. Many in Tehran believe that a lot of the motorbiked Basij are in fact Arabs doing the "dirty work" true nationalist Persians would refuse. Basij have been fighting hard for hours to subdue throngs of protesters.

There are widespread reports of a "staggering" number of injured in Tehran hospitals. A Basiji center in north Tehran seems to have been captured by protesters on Sunday night. This means the green revolution having access to weapons.

This has nothing to do with the US-supported color-coded revolutions in Eurasia. This is about Iran. An election was stolen in the [United States](#) in 2000 and Americans didn't do a thing about it. Iranians are willing to die to have their votes counted. There is now an opening for a true Iranian people-power movement not specifically to the benefit of Mousavi, but with Mousavi as the catalyst in a wider struggle for real democratic legitimacy. The die is cast; now it's people power against "divine assessment".