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Why U.S. Neocons Want Ahmadinejad to Win

By Stephen Zunes
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The only people happier than the Iranian elites over Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's apparently [stolen election win](#) Friday, were the neoconservatives and other hawks eager to block any efforts by the Obama administration to moderate U.S. policy toward the Islamic republic.

Since he was elected president in 2005, Ahmadinejad has filled a certain niche in the American psyche formerly filled by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi as the Middle Eastern leader we most love to hate. It gives us a sense of righteous superiority to compare ourselves favorably to these seemingly irrational and fanatical foreign despots.

Better yet, if these despots can be inflated into far greater threats than they actually are, these supposed threats can be used to justify the enormous financial and human costs of maintaining American armed forces in that volatile region to protect ourselves and our allies, and even to make war against far-off nations in "self-defense."

Such inflated threats also have the added bonus of silencing critics of America's overly-militarized Middle East policy, since anyone who dares to challenge the hyperbole and exaggerated claims regarding these leaders' misdeeds or to provide a more balanced and realistic assessment of the actual threat they represent can then be depicted as naive apologists for dangerous fanatics who threaten our national security.

The neocons have not been subtle about their desire for Ahmadinejad to continue playing this important role. For example, right-wing pundit Daniel Pipes, at a panel discussion at the Heritage Foundation just before the election, said that he would vote for Ahmadinejad if he could, because he prefers "an enemy who is forthright, blatant, obvious."

Last Wednesday, Congressional Republicans -- in an apparent effort to enhance the chances of Iranian hard liners just two days before the election -- tried to push for a floor vote to strengthen sanctions against Iran.

It is interesting how some of the very foreign policy hawks who just days ago were dismissing Mir Hossein Mousavi's expected victory as irrelevant since, in their view, there was essentially no meaningful difference between him and Ahmadinejad, are now among the most self-righteous in denouncing the apparent fraud and outspoken in their pseudo-outrage at the rigged results.

Their worst-case scenario would be a nonviolent insurrection that would topple Ahmadinejad and allied hard-line clerics comparable to those that followed attempts to steal elections in such countries as the Philippines and Serbia. Neither the neocons nor Iran's reactionary leadership want to see that oil-rich regional power under a popular and legitimate government. Indeed, the neocons and Iranian hard-liners need each other.

The Impact on Relations with the United States

In one sense, there really are not huge differences between the two leading candidates in last Friday's Iranian presidential election on key foreign policy issues that most concern the United States.

For example, virtually all leading Iranian political figures, including Mousavi, defend what they consider to be Iran's right to engage in nuclear enrichment and other aspects of the country's thus-far civilian nuclear program.

More critically, the president is far from being the most powerful figure in Iranian politics, particularly on foreign policy issues.

Furthermore, as outrageous and offensive as Ahmadinejad's comments regarding Israel and the Holocaust may be, the Iranian president is not commander-in-chief of the armed forces, so Ahmadinejad would be incapable of ordering an attack on Israel even if Iran had the means to do so.

Though the clerics who really do wield power certainly take hard-line positions on a number of policy areas, collective leadership normally mitigates impulsive actions such as launching a war of aggression, especially if your enemy has a massive nuclear-deterrent capability that could obliterate your country in less than 15 minutes. Indeed, bold and risky policies rarely come out of committees.

Similarly, there is little difference between the two presidential front-runners regarding Iraq and Afghanistan either, since there is a broad consensus that Iran has a right to support allied elements and to marginalize potentially hostile elements in these two bordering countries.

And, despite Ahmadinejad's hostile rhetoric regarding Israel, Iran is on record supporting the Islamic Conference in endorsing the Arab League's peace plan calling for normal relations and non-aggression toward Israel in return for Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories seized in the June 1967 war.

A Clash of Fundamentalisms

I had a chance to meet Ahmadinejad when he came to New York for the General Assembly in October 2007. I was unimpressed. Indeed, he came across as more pathetic than evil.

He was clearly someone sincerely devout in his religious faith, yet rather superficial in his understanding and inclined to twist his faith tradition in ways to correspond with his preconceived ideological positions.

He was rather evasive when it came to specific questions and was not terribly coherent, relying more on platitudes than analysis and would tend to get his facts wrong. In short, he reminded me in many respects of the man who was then serving as our president.

Both Ahmadinejad and George W. Bush used their fundamentalist interpretations of their respective faith traditions to place the world in a Manichean perspective of good versus evil. The certitude of their positions regardless of evidence to the contrary, their sense that they are part of a divine mission, and their largely successful manipulation of their devoutly religious constituents was what put these two nations on such a dangerous confrontational course in recent years.

It is unfortunate that Ahmadinejad is apparently remaining in office despite the fact that the United States now has a reformer in the White House. It was similarly unfortunate timing that when it was Iran that had the reformist president -- Ahmadinejad's predecessor Mohammed Khatami -- it was Bush who was in office.

Indeed, Khatami offered strict safeguards and oversight of Iran's nuclear weapons program along the lines now being demanded by the United States, as well as an end to its support for terrorist groups and peaceful relations with Israel in return for the U.S. lifting its sanctions, ending efforts to destabilize the government and normalizing relations. The Bush administration refused the offer, however.

It was this refusal to deal, combined with strengthened sanctions -- some of which were initiated under the Clinton administration when Khatami was first elected -- that sent the message to Iranians that conciliatory efforts by reformers would be rejected.

On top of that, the U.S. invasion of two of Iraq's immediate neighbors in 2001 and 2003, combined with open calls of "regime change" in Iran, likely helped make possible the conservative victories in the 2005 Iranian election.

Ahmadinejad's first election was not necessarily evidence of a turn to the right by the Iranian electorate regarding domestic policy either. The clerical leadership's restrictions on who could run made it nearly impossible for any real reformist to emerge as a presidential contender.

Ahmadinejad's opponent in the runoff election was the 70-year-old Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who was seen as a corrupt representative of the political establishment. The fact that he had become a millionaire while in government overshadowed his modest reform agenda. By contrast, Ahmadinejad, the relatively young Tehran mayor, focused on the plight of the poor and cleaning up corruption.

As a result, Iranian voters were forced to choose between two flawed candidates in the 2005 presidential race. The relatively liberal contender came across as an out-of-touch elitist, and

his ultraconservative opponent was able to assemble a coalition of rural, less-educated and fundamentalist voters to conduct a pseudopopulist campaign based on promoting morality and value-centered leadership to eke out a narrow victory.

In short, it bore some resemblance to the presidential election in the United States the previous year.

Given that Ahmadinejad as president has actually done little to support the economically disadvantaged or oppose endemic corruption, combined with the election of a new American president who was actually willing to reward greater moderation, it was widely assumed he would lose badly at the polls this year.

This is why, even before the recent leaks from the Iranian Interior Ministry regarding the blatant manipulation of the vote count, so many people inside and out of Iran assumed there had been fraud on a massive scale.

Iranian Nationalism

Most analysis of Iran tends to exaggerate the country's theocratic aspects in regard to its foreign policy and downplays the role of nationalism, which Ahmadinejad has skillfully manipulated.

In the process, Ahmadinejad has also allowed the mainstream media and opportunistic politicians in both major parties to become obsessed with Iran's nuclear program -- still many years away from producing an atomic bomb -- while hypocritically supporting Iran's neighbors Pakistan, India and Israel, which (like Iran) are also in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear programs, and which (unlike Iran) have already developed nuclear weapons.

This obsession has been made easier by Ahmadinejad's anti-Israel rhetoric, although his views are not nearly as extreme as they have been depicted.

For example, Ahmadinejad never actually threatened to "wipe Israel off the map," nor has he demonstrated a newly hostile Iranian posture toward the Jewish state. Not only is this oft-quoted statement a mistranslation -- the idiom does not exist in Farsi, and the reference was to the dissolution of the regime, not the physical destruction of the nation -- the Iranian president was quoting from a statement by Ayatollah Khomeini from nearly 25 years ago.

At that time, however, the Reagan administration was quietly supporting Iran with clandestine arms shipments, so such statements were played down here in the United States. Now that this alleged quote serves a convenient political purpose to exaggerate the supposed Iranian threat, however, it has conveniently been repeated over and over to make the case that, should Iran obtain a nuclear weapon, Ahmadinejad would somehow launch a suicidal nuclear attack against Israel, regardless of the inevitable Israeli nuclear retaliation and despite the fact that Ahmadinejad would have no control over Iranian nukes or missiles anyway.

This incessant claim that he has "vowed to wipe Israel off the map" keeps emanating from the lips of American politicians of both parties despite Ahmadinejad's subsequent clarifications that it is "not Iran's intention to destroy Israel" and that the future he envisioned of the nonexistence of the Israeli state (the more literal translation) was comparable to the

dissolution of the Soviet Union: That is, it is no longer on a map because it no longer exists as a state, not because the country was physically destroyed.

The double-standard on the nuclear issue is but one part of U.S. policy that has allowed Ahmadinejad to play the nationalist card to his advantage.

For example, the U.S. government has blamed Iran for the deaths of American soldiers in Iraq, yet 95 percent of U.S. casualties have been from anti-Iranian Sunni insurgents.

The U.S. government has focused on Iranian human rights abuses while continuing to arm and support the even more oppressive and theocratic Islamic regime in Saudi Arabia.

The U.S. government attacks the Iranian president's denial of the genocide of European Jews while remaining silent in the face of Turkish leaders' continued denial of the genocide of Armenians.

The U.S. government raises concerns about Iran's apparent election fraud while remaining silent in the face of rigged presidential elections by such allied governments as Egypt and Azerbaijan and the complete lack of national elections in such allied countries as Saudi Arabia and Oman.

It is highly unlikely that Ahmadinejad actually won the majority of the vote in Friday's Iranian election, certainly not the 63 percent granted to him by the Interior Ministry he controls.

However, he and other hard-liners have been able to dominate the country as much as they have in large part as a result of their ability to play on the overwhelming resentment of Iranians from across the ideological spectrum regarding U.S. policy toward their country, ranging from the overthrow of their last truly democratic government by the CIA back in 1953, through the quarter-century of support for the shah's oppressive rule, to the shortsighted and hypocritical policies of more recent years.

Americans have many legitimate concerns regarding Iranian policies, Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric, and the apparent stealing of the presidential election. However, as long as U.S. policy appears to be based upon such opportunistic double standards rather than consistent principles, Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric will continue to find an audience, and the hard-liners will still be able to play on the fears and resentments of the Iranian people in their efforts to cling to power.