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Iran's Election Drama More Elaborate Than You Think

By Muhammad Sahimi

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The world has been mesmerized by events in Iran over the past several weeks. First, there was a fierce presidential campaign that saw Mir Hossein Mousavi, the main reformist candidate, rise in the polls. Huge rallies were held around Iran to support his candidacy. For the first time since the 1979 Revolution, Iranians at home and abroad seemed to be united in their quest to oust President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

One hour after voting had ended on June 12, Iran's Interior Ministry had called Mousavi's headquarters to inform him that he was going to win, and that he should prepare his victory statement without boasting too much, in order not to upset Ahmadinejad's supporters. But suddenly everything changed. Several commanders of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRG) showed up at Mousavi's headquarters and told him that his campaign was tantamount to a "velvet revolution," which they would not allow to succeed. Then the results of the rigged election were announced, which started the protests that continue today.

But who is the real power behind Iran's rigged presidential election, which has been called an "election coup" by a Mousavi spokesman? It is widely believed that, as the commander in chief of Iran's armed forces, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is the coup leader. But the issue is more complex.

Ever since he was appointed as the IRG's top commander three years ago, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari has been talking about the "internal threat" to the Islamic Revolution. He has even reorganized the Guards for them to be better prepared for any uprising. Moreover, a few days before the June 12 elections, the IRG's head of the political directorate, Brig. Gen. Yadollah Javani, accused Mousavi and other reformists of trying to start a color revolution (since Mousavi had used green as the symbol of its campaign), and warned that the Guards "will suffocate it before it is even born." So the coup leaders are, in fact, the IRG's

top commanders. They represent the right wing of the second generation of Iranian revolutionaries.

The second-generation revolutionaries were in their twenties at the time of the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979. They joined the IRG almost immediately after the Revolution and fought two fierce wars in the 1980s: against Saddam Hussein's forces, which had invaded Iran in September 1980, and against the forces of Mujahideen-e Khalq organization (MEK), an armed Islamic leftist group that had opposed the shah. After the MEK began assassinating Iran's leaders in June 1981, the young revolutionaries waged a bloody battle against them, killing thousands, and forced the MEK into exile in Iraq, where it collaborated with Saddam Hussein. The MEK is now listed by the State Department as a terrorist organization.

Using the war with Iraq as the excuse, the young Islamic revolutionaries also helped their clerical leaders – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who was elected Iran's president for two terms from 1989-1997 and is still a powerful politician), Ayatollah Khamenei (who was Iran's president in the 1980s), and others – to impose extreme political repression on Iran, one result of which was the effective elimination of all secular political groups from Iran's political scene, a terrible blow to Iran's political development.

The war with Iraq ended in July 1988. Many of the young Islamic revolutionaries either supported the execution of thousands of political prisoners in July-September 1988 or were silent and did not protest it. Then, Ayatollah Khomeini passed away in June 1989. That split the young revolutionaries into two camps.

In one camp were the Islamic leftists who believed that Iran needed a political opening to end the extreme repression of the 1980s. Many in this group were members of the intelligence apparatus and, therefore, were fully aware of what was going on in the society and sensed the danger of a social explosion and counterrevolution. They are now the leaders of the reform movement.

The young revolutionaries in the second camp were conservative. Some stayed with the IRG after the war, people like Gen. Jafari and Gen. Javani. Others, such as President Ahmadinejad, Interior Minister Sadegh Mahsouli, and his main deputy Kamran Daneshjou (all serving in the IRG), who supervised the elections, joined the bureaucracy.

Ayatollah Khomeini's death had another long-term consequence whose effect is felt today. It made it possible for a reactionary Islamic group to reemerge. The group, called the Hojjatiyeh Society, was founded in the 1950s and was fiercely opposed to the Bahai faith and the Sunni sect of Islam, and it even worked with the shah's secret service to stymie the spread of Communism in Iran. It also opposed the 1979 Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of Valaayat-e Faghih (governance of the Islamic jurist), the foundation of Iran's constitution and political system. Ayatollah Khomeini banned the Hojjatiyeh in 1983 and famously said of them that "they cannot run even a bakery, let alone a country."

After its reemergence in the early 1990, the name Hojjatiyeh was never used. Its members began advocating an Islamic government led by an unelected supreme leader, rather than an Islamic Republic. Their present leader is Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a hard-liner and reactionary cleric who has openly opposed any meaningful elections and is Ahmadinejad's spiritual leader.

Ayatollah Mesbah, as he is called in Iran, once said, “It does not matter what people think. They are ignorant sheep.” He believes that the supreme leader is *selected* by God, and the task of the ayatollahs who are members of Iran’s Assembly of Experts (a constitutional body that chooses the supreme leader) is to *discover* him. Former reformist president Mohammad Khatami has referred to Ayatollah Mesbah’s followers as the “shallow-thinking traditionalists with Stone-Age backwardness.”

Ayatollah Mesbah’s disciples include Intelligence Minister Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejehei, Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh (a senior aid to Ahmadinejad), and Ahmadinejad himself. In fact, all of Iran’s intelligence ministers since the Revolution have been Ayatollah Mesbah’s students in his seminary, the Haghani School in Qom. Many of the top commanders of the IRG are his followers. The Basij militia, a paramilitary group controlled by the IRG, has also been deeply penetrated by his disciples, as has the judiciary. Ever since he was elected president in 2005, Ahmadinejad has repeatedly used Ayatollah Mesbah’s term “Islamic government of Iran” rather than “Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Thus, the men behind the election coup are the second-generation revolutionaries whose spiritual leader is Ayatollah Mesbah. Two weeks before the elections Mesbah issued a secret fatwa – which was leaked by some in the Interior Ministry – authorizing the use of any means to reelect Ahmadinejad, hence giving the green light for rigging the elections.

But what are the goals of the coup? There appear to be three.

One is purging the old, first-generation revolutionary leaders, including the most important of them, the former president and powerful politician Rafsanjani. Ever since Ahmadinejad defeated him in the disputed 2005 presidential elections, he and his supporters have been bitter foes of Rafsanjani and his supporters. Rafsanjani has let it be known that he believes that Ahmadinejad is hurting Iran’s national interests with his foreign policy, rhetoric against Israel, and inflammatory statements about the Holocaust.

But the antagonism toward Rafsanjani has an economic dimension too. He and his family are fabulously rich and favor a modern economy. And just as Ahmadinejad has consolidated the IRG’s hold on Iran by appointing cabinet members, provincial governor-generals, and city mayors from the ranks of the IRG, he also wants to consolidate the IRG’s hold on Iran’s economy. Under him, the IRG has won more than \$10 billion in contracts over the past four years. The IRG now wants to eliminate the competition from Rafsanjani and his supporters.

In his “victory” speech on Sunday June 14, Ahmadinejad never mentioned even once Ayatollah Khomeini or the Islamic Republic. Thus, just as Deng Xiaoping and his successors have kept Mao Zedong’s pictures everywhere and Joseph Stalin kept Lenin’s pictures everywhere while acting against what Mao and Lenin advocated, Iran’s second-generation revolutionaries will keep Ayatollah Khomeini’s pictures everywhere (as well as Khamenei’s) while acting against his teachings, including his most famous saying, “The scale [for people’s acceptance of a politician] is the people’s vote.”

The second goal of the coup is moving the country toward an Islamic government by making the elections a meaningless process that can be easily rigged or manipulated, which will destroy the republican aspect of Iran’s political system. This is recognized by the reformists, and indeed the great majority of the Iranian people, which is why they are resisting the rigged elections. Their resistance is not what the coup leaders expected.

The third goal is to start the preparation for the eventual replacement of Ayatollah Khamenei, who is known to be ill, by someone they trust. Rafsanjani chairs the Assembly of Experts that selects the supreme leader. Given his important role in the Revolution and his influence, Rafsanjani will play a crucial role in the succession process. Thus, if he can be eliminated, it will pave the way for Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, or one of his disciples, to become the supreme leader.

Thus, this is a pivotal moment in Iran's contemporary history, and indeed the Middle East's. If the second-generation revolutionaries succeed, Iran will enter a period of extreme political repression, which will make it easier for the War Party and the Israel lobby to try to convince the public that Iran's nuclear program must be handled through military attacks.

If, on the other hand, the protests succeed in turning back the rigged elections, the reformists and democratic groups will have a golden opportunity to move Iran much faster toward a democratic political system, which will be crucial to the stability of the Middle East.