

IRAN: THE NEW ARISES FROM INSIDE THE OLD

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The question whether there was fraud in the Iranian elections seems rather irrelevant since in essence it served as a spark for the confrontation between two Irans. One consisted of the urban middle class, hurt by both inflation and economic stagnation and of the educated youth and women who see no future in the regime's introvert authoritarian policies. The other comprises of rural masses closely knitted to state's subsidies and clientelism and guided by ultra-conservative clerics, the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij paramilitary organisations.

In any case, there is no hard evidence about the size of the fraud and most importantly there is no safe poll about the winner of the election. It is beyond doubt that Ahmadinejad has become a symbol for many in the rural and poor urban areas, who remained alienated by an affluent new post-Revolutionary elite, represented by Mousavi and most importantly, his ally, Hashemi Rafsanjani. A vivid depiction of this social dichotomy can be seen in the Oscar nominated movie *Children of Heaven* of Majid Majidi. Because of this stark dichotomy, irrespective of who won the elections, the confrontation between these two Irans was inevitable.

There was, on the part of the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei camp, an often repeated allegation that foreign powers, i.e. USA and Britain, were behind the uprising following patterns of the «coloured» revolutions elsewhere. No one can exclude the possibility that intelligence agencies might exploit the opportunity to gather information or to recruit human intelligence but the scope and the magnitude of the protest and the key positions in the Islamic Republic held by leaders of the opposition such as Hossein Mousavi, Hashemi Rafsanjani or Mohammad Khatami and Mehdi Karoubi, render the accusation that CIA and British Intelligence are behind the turmoil not credible. On the other hand this

type of allegation is targeting domestic political opponents rather than foreign governments. By stigmatising politicians and activists as US and British agents, they neutralise their political discourse and undermine their credibility. It is a tactic well-known in the Middle East and the Balkans. After all, accusing somebody of treason seems more lethal for his/her ideas than death or prison. Do not forget that the rural masses and the urban proletariat do not have access to twitter, sms and internet and their sole source of information are the state-controlled Iranian TV and censored newspapers.

Most of the leaders of the protest belong to the mainstay of the Islamic regime. They never called for a regime change but they rather try to defend the core of the Islamic Republic from a coup by the ultra-conservatives premeditated by a coalition of part of the high-clergy, the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij paramilitary. Let us not forget that today's share of power is based on an old agreement between Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khamenei, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. According to this agreement Rafsanjani was to control the Executive while Khamenei was elevated to the status of the Supreme Leader although he did not have the appropriate religious credentials at the time. That deal was to govern Iran for the past twenty or so years but it had been seriously undermined after first Ahmadinejad's electoral victory. Another salient aspect of the controversy are the corporate interests of the Revolutionary Guards, who far from being simply a paramilitary group, they possessed enterprises, funds and political connections that were well served by Ahmadinejad rule and might have been jeopardised by Mousavi's victory.

According to Khomeini's supreme leadership tradition, the Leader should stand above every-day political feuds. Ayatollah Khamenei chose to take sides and support Ahmadinejad, thus abandoning this tradition, another clear sign of breaking with post-Khomeini's power-deal. Such a decision may, however, injure his spiritual authority undermining one of the regime's foundations.

There is considerable difference between today's crisis and the student protests in 1999 and 2003. Today's gigantic protests have political centre and

spine. They are not simply eruptions of students' discontent against an authoritarian regime, which curtails civil and human rights and executes minors. They represent much wider urban social strata disaffected by the inflation of almost 30%, the stagnation in investments and the mismanagement of the country's rich oil and gas resources, more so since it is a period of high prices for both commodities. These social strata are aligned to part of the clergy's rank-and-file. The stance of the vast constituency of the bazaar merchants still remains ambivalent. It is however beyond any doubt that their support is indispensable for the stability and longevity of any regime in Iran.

Last, but not least, how far this volatile situation inside Iran would influence its foreign policy? It has already influenced it. The conservative side tried the old game of scapegoating by accusing USA and Britain for conspiring against Iran and, as a result, they put this country's relations with the West in more strains. On the other hand, America and its allies have every interest to see a stable Iran the soonest possible, under any government, if they wish to negotiate seriously over the nuclear issue. If there is no partner, voices in Israel and elsewhere calling for military options might get louder and, alas, more persuasive. There has already been pressure by think tanks and lobbyists on President Obama to interfere in Iranian domestic situation by siding openly with the opposition. Obama administration has pledged a solution of Iran's nuclear program by the end of this year. Although such a prospect seems beyond reality, the US could succeed in having direct face-to-face negotiations with Iran, which is quite an achievement taking into consideration the laborious negotiations necessary for setting the terms of reference of such talks. Moreover, stability in Iraq and victory in Afghanistan cannot be achieved without Iran's active engagement. With a volatile political regime in Tehran, it would be very difficult to go through such negotiations successfully.

On the other hand, many Middle Eastern regimes, though they harbour no love for Iran and its regime, are feeling uneasy with a potentially successfully popular uprising next to their borders. It might set a poisoning example for the

longevity of many Middle Eastern ruling elites. The Iranian regime itself would be less predictable. The electoral defeat of Hezbollah in Lebanon and some signs from Damascus for reconciliation with the US and the West may well decrease Iran's leverage in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

We shall finish with some words by Hoshang Asadi from his article in roozonline website: *In human history and society, "new" always arises from "inside" the old. It begins with criticism of the old, then it rejects it, and finally gives way to the new through the mixture of the thesis and anti-thesis. It is still too early to conclude that the new has overcome the old. The new has only been born, and the old has not yet died. History has only delivered the new child. The child cannot be destroyed any longer; it is here to stay.*