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And the winner is – Khamenei

By Pepe Escobar
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Nothing will be left to chance - even the hint of a green protest wave.

In 2009, 475 candidates registered to run for Iran's presidency. Only four were approved by the Guardian Council - the all-powerful, vetting clerical committee. This year, no fewer than 686 registered for the upcoming June 14 elections. Eight were approved.

Among them, one won't find the two who are really controversial; former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, aka "The Shark" - essentially a pragmatic conservative - and Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, adviser and right-hand man to outgoing President Mahmud Ahmadinejad are both out.

Those who will run are not exactly a stellar bunch; former vice president Mohammad Reza Aref; former national security chief Hassan Rowhani; former telecommunications minister Mohammad Gharazi; the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Saeed Jalili; Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf; the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign policy adviser Ali Akbar Velayati; secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei; and Parliament Speaker Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel.

But they do read like a who's who of ultimate Islamic Republic insiders - the so-called "principle-ists".

Shark out of water

According to the Interior Ministry, The Shark is out because of his advanced age (78). Not really. The Shark is out because he was the top moderate running - and was already catalyzing the support of most (excluded) reformists.

Mashaei is out because he would represent an Ahmadinejad continuum - supported by quite a few of Ahmadinejad's cabinet ministers and profiting from a formidable populist political machine that still seduces Iran's countryside and the urban poor. He would deepen Ahmadinejad's drive for an independent executive. This may not be a done deal - yet. Both Rafsanjani and Mashaei cannot, in theory, appeal. But the Supreme Leader himself could lend them a hand. That's unlikely, though.

Rafsanjani waited for the last day, May 11, to register as a potential candidate. Former president Khatami - of "dialogue of civilizations" fame - did not register, and announced his support for Rafsanjani the day before. One can imagine alarm bells ringing at the Supreme Leader's abode.

The Shark was recently reconfirmed as chairman of the powerful Expediency Council - which oversees the government (Khamenei had this post while Ayatollah Khomeini was still alive). This may be interpreted as a sort of consolation prize.

Ahmadinejad, for his part, had been hinting at blackmail - threatening to spill all the beans on corruption by the Supreme Leader's family. He will hardly be handed any favors.

Assuming the Supreme Leader remains immobile, himself and his subordinates across the conservative political elite do run a serious risk - that of totally alienating two very significant political factions in the Islamic Republic. By then, arguably the Guardian Council will have cleared the field for an easy victory by the former Revolutionary Guard Air Force commander and current Mayor of Tehran Qalibaf.

Qalibaf would be the ultimate politically correct vehicle for what I have described since 2009 as the military dictatorship of the mullahtariat - that is, the grip on Iran's institutional life by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and conservative clerics under the real decider, Supreme Leader Khamenei.

This report alludes to the not exactly gentle side of Qalibaf. That, in itself, is not surprising. Infinitely more crucial is the question of whether Khamenei and the ultra-conservatives can afford to remain ensconced in an ivory tower as the internal economic situation deteriorates further and a vociferous Sunni Arab axis - amply instigated by the US and supported by Israel - is barking at Iran's doors.

Vote, or else...

In the coming elections, the Supreme Leader badly needs numbers to boost the system's legitimacy. Thus municipal and rural elections will be held for the first time on the same day as the presidential poll.

For a little while, it seemed that Rafsanjani would be able to catalyze all the opposition. Now the reformist call for a boycott is bound to spread. But there's a huge problem. Voting in Iran is compulsory; if you don't vote, your chances of getting a job in government or a semi-official organization is in jeopardy. This means goodbye to a precious steady job, with free housing, no utility bills, decent salaries and benefits.

Everyone needs to carry a national ID booklet with stamps corresponding to every election. So a lot of educated urban youth actually go to the polls, but vote blank.

In rural Iran, things are much easier for the government. On December 2011, it ended plenty of subsidies for household goods and energy. To compensate the rise of inflation, the government started making direct payments to plenty of Iranian families - thus assuring its support in many rural provinces.

For the ultra-conservatives, nothing is enough to prevent a repeat of what happened in 2009; the green wave; Ahmadinejad's victory over reformist Mir Hossein Mousavi severely contested; anger in the streets; huge demonstrations; violent repression.

Mousavi, his wife (artist Zahra Rahnavard), and former parliament speaker Mehdi Karroubi - all Green Movement stalwarts - have been under house arrest since the large street protests of February 2011. Repression has not abated - on the contrary (see, for example this report in the Guardian. And that also spilled over to the Ahmadinejad camp; even pro-Ahmadinejad clerics have been rounded up or arrested by security services in some provinces, and five websites campaigning for Mashaie were shut down.

All VPNs (virtual private networks) have been closed down at myriad of Iranian Internet cafes, and Internet speed has been slowed to a trickle.

Even if all this "prevention system" works; and even if the Supreme Leader has his way (and winning candidate, possibly Qalibaf), the outlook is not pleasant. The post-Ahmadinejad incumbent will inherit an ultra-fragmented political landscape; a lot of people blaming the government's appalling management as well as international sanctions for their plight; and the same hardcore hostility displayed by the US, Israel and the Sunni axis. Hangin' on in quiet desperation seems to be the popular Iranian way.