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Forget Iran's president, the power is Ayatollah Khamenei's

By Mehdi Khalaji

3/19/2009

The decision of the former Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, not to seek the presidency again, after announcing earlier that he would, has revealed how muddled Iranian presidential politics truly are. In trying to sort out this muddle, the most important thing to keep in mind is not so much who will be elected next June, but what that choice will reveal about the intentions of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Unfortunately, the most likely outcome will be the continued transformation of the Islamic Republic from a country led by a civil government into a garrison state in which the military plays a major role in determining political and economic matters.

Who will actually win the vote is unpredictable, but not because Iran is a democratic country. Ayatollah Khamenei, who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, oversees the agencies that will run the election: the Council of Guardians and the Interior Ministry, which supervise the electoral process, and the Basij militia and Revolutionary Guards, which unofficially control the ballot-boxes and the vote-counting process.

Recent surveys show that the increasing unpopularity of the current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, stems primarily from the shortcomings of his economic policies. Although oil prices reached an all-time high in 2008, unemployment and inflation (now increasing at 31 percent) are out of control and the government is facing a \$44 billion budget deficit. The public sector accounts for roughly 80 percent of the economy, and relies mostly on now-plummeting oil revenue, while Iranian banks face a credit crisis, with Mahmoud Bahmani, the governor of the Iran Central Bank, estimating total delinquent payments to be \$38 billion.

But Ahmadinejad's unpopularity does not necessarily weaken his chances of being re-elected. A few months before the election, neither of the two main political currents, whether conservative or reformist, has settled on its candidate. Among the reformists now in the race, Mehdi Karroubi, the former speaker of the Majlis, Iran's parliament, is a declared reformist candidate. Mir Hossein Moussavi, a former prime minister, has also announced his candidacy and Abdullah Nouri is expected to join the race.

On the conservative side, Ahmadinejad so far stands on his own. But many conservatives also oppose his economic policies, as well as his management style. Conservative voices have repeatedly argued that their support for Ahmadinejad will cost them votes and will only reinforce the economic crisis. Conservative disenchantment with Ahmadinejad is also apparent in the current Majlis, which is predominantly conservative. The Majlis has rejected the government's economic bills, and has repeatedly impeached or challenged Ahmadinejad's Cabinet ministers.

Iran's main diplomatic challenge in the near future will center on the developments of its nuclear program as well as its relations with the United States. Since the president has no authority over these issues, any disagreement between the Ayatollah Khamenei and the next president will place the president in a difficult position, without his having any real power.

In terms of domestic policy, the major challenge for the next president will be to address Iran's economic problems. The country's over-reliance on oil revenues, the effect of longstanding international sanctions, and the reluctance of foreign companies to invest in Iran have exacerbated the economy's structural problems.

Perhaps one of the most significant elements in Iran's stagnation is that the Revolutionary Guards control a large portion of the economy, and are beyond the reach of the government's regulatory powers. In order to manage the economic crisis successfully, any new president will not only have to shift economic policy, he will also have to amass enough political power to be able to thwart the intervention of the Revolutionary Guards and other organizations in economic policy-making.

Former President Khatami's initial decision to run for the post again grabbed the international community's attention. Yet a Khatami victory would not have guaranteed change. As president, he faced criticism from reformists for his failure to resist a range of powerful groups that sabotaged economic reform and an improvement in Iran's relations with the West.

Khatami's organizational savvy had not improved much since that time. So far, he lacks even a media platform for his faction. Reformist critics believe that in order to mobilize people it will not be enough just to campaign against Ahmadinejad. If a reformer is to win he must prove that he will be able to sway Iran's political structures toward an agenda of reform.

But reformists ask: If the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, does not even permit the Khatami faction to operate a newspaper, would he really have allowed Khatami to become president? Even if a reformer does become president in this summer's elections, will he ever be able to overcome his differences with the supreme leader?

Speculation about the outcome of the election is an interesting parlor game. But it should not distract us from the fundamentals of Iranian politics. The next president may have some room to adjust economic or social policies. But, on the big issues of

foreign policy, relations with the West, and the nuclear program, the identity of the president is not important. These issues will be decided by a man who is not running for office in June, but whose power is secure: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader.