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Iran Unrest Shifts Power Dynamics Reformists Must Rethink Strategy

By Tara Bahrapour
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The large-scale protests in [Iran](#) since its hotly disputed June 12 presidential election have shaken the Islamic republic's long-standing balance of political power.

For decades, hard-line members of Iran's cleric-led government controlled the judiciary, military, intelligence and state media. But reformists also had wide public support and room to push for more moderate social and political policies.

That delicate balance worked for both sides, providing an outlet for people who chafed at the Islamic regime's austerity and isolationism, while ensuring that the core system, created after the 1979 revolution, would not be seriously challenged. The reformists did not advocate a revolutionary overhaul. The general view was that Iranians did not want another revolution.

But the recent protests attracted hundreds of thousands into Iran's streets, resulting in at least 17 deaths and many more injuries. The hard-liners have tightened their grip, leaving the reformists to decide whether they should keep playing the old game or whether the rules have changed so much that the game no longer exists.

Dozens of reformists have been arrested as others have watched from exile. The Guardian Council, a 12-member body of jurists who oversee laws and elections, this week certified President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the winner over opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and others. After the ruling, some reformists warned that Iran could become a one-party state similar to Saddam Hussein's [Iraq](#).

Others point to an unprecedented splintering within the establishment, with high-ranking ayatollahs and conservatives criticizing the election and the crackdown. This, they say, has strengthened the reformists' hand, as have the street protests.

"Elections were always marred in Iran . . . but they were never faked," said Ahmad Sadri, a columnist for the reformist newspaper Etemad-e-Melli and chairman of Islamic world studies at Lake Forest College near Chicago. Elections have always helped give the regime its

legitimacy, he said. Now, amid widespread allegations of vote fraud, that has been lost, he said. "By faking the elections, the right wing has sort of killed the goose that laid the golden egg."

The crackdown has pushed many politicians and ordinary citizens, including some staunch regime supporters, to the reformists' side, analysts said. But some shifting preceded the election, said Farideh Farhi, an Iran expert at the University of Hawaii. "The reform movement, with Ahmadinejad's presidency, actually became widened and ended up including a lot of people who wouldn't normally have been part of it," Farhi said.

It is not the first shift in alliances in the Islamic republic's 30-year-old history. After the 1979 revolution that ousted the shah, the clerics solidified their power by jailing, executing or exiling many of the Marxists, socialists and Western-style democrats who had fought alongside them. But Iran's government never hardened into a monolithic, single-party apparatus.

"One of the things that has characterized the Islamic republic from Day One is the inability to clamp down on the elite political structure," Farhi said. "They were never able to create a revolutionary party, like the Communist Party in the Soviet Union or [China](#)."

Instead, after its eight-year war with Iraq, the regime found it had to contend with a reformist movement, led in some cases by revolutionaries-turned-moderates. Seeking gradual change within the system, they had their most public success with the 1997 election of Mohammad Khatami, a president who promoted dialogue with the West and a loosening of social restrictions, and whose relatively moderate cabinet provided a counterweight to the hard-liners.

After two terms, however, many reform-minded Iranians were disillusioned by Khatami's insistence on working within the existing political system and his inability to bring about more meaningful change. Cynicism led many to boycott the 2005 presidential election, which ushered in Ahmadinejad and a return to harsher rhetoric and isolationism. Arrests and exile of reformists followed.

But their movement did not lie dormant, said Trita Parsi, president of the Washington-based National Iranian American Council. "It worked ferociously behind the scenes to pose a credible challenge to Ahmadinejad in the elections. When looking at the Mousavi campaign, it was probably the most impressive, modern and sophisticated campaign Iran yet has seen."

The fervor of that campaign and its aftermath took both sides aback. "I did not expect to see the people come out on the street," said Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a reformist and former lawmaker who left Iran in 2005 after being arrested and is now a visiting scholar at the University of Massachusetts.

The protesters created a new dynamic outside the traditional power balance, said Abbas Milani, director of Iranian studies at Stanford University. "It's gone way beyond the reformist movement in Iran altogether; I think it is much wider."

Still, he said, the demonstrators chose to coalesce around the moderate Mousavi "rather than start afresh, with what would be a complete revolution." They have seen a revolution, he said, that was "ruthless and the most violent. People don't want that anymore."

Analysts said that for politicians such as former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who has criticized the election, an upheaval is not desirable because they are longtime players in the existing system and would probably lose their standing in a brand-new government. Rather, analysts say, they are probably trying to strike a compromise within the system.

"There is a process of negotiation going on," Farhi said. "If Mr. Mousavi is expected to give up his call for reelection, then the question is: What is the other side going to give up?" Among the possibilities, she said, might be releasing those arrested, allowing the publication of reformist newspapers and letting people like Mousavi be politically active.

It is unclear whether the hard-liners would agree to such compromises. "Based on what we've seen the last four years, it's clear that Iran's hard-liners are not interested in sharing power or the country's vast oil wealth with anyone," said Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "They're monopolists."

Reformists may also be thinking in a more radical direction, Sadjadpour said. "I think in private all the reformists would agree that the position of supreme leader needs to be either abolished or its powers need to be severely curtailed. But most are still too afraid to say it publicly. No one wants to use the word 'revolution,' but everyone understands that profound change is needed."

It is unclear whether this understanding is shared inside the government, which has suggested that those arrested for protesting the election may face harsh punishment and even execution.

The Guardian Council's confirmation of the election results has further limited reformists' options, said Ali Afshari, a student leader in Tehran in the 1990s who spent three years in prison and now lives in Washington. "They have closed any possibility for change inside the regime."

If the struggle has tipped into something more radical, that may not be evident on the streets, where the protests have largely been quelled. But analysts said this does not mean they are over.

"Reformist, pragmatic, centrist forces will continue to challenge his [Ahmadinejad's] rule and question the legitimacy" of his government, Parsi said. "The current protest movement is not a one-trick pony. It can manifest its protestations through many means."

Sadri, of Lake Forest College, said the reformists must "find new ways to stay organized and stay focused" to succeed in the long run. "They can wait for an opportunity -- an economic crisis, a political upheaval. . . . We don't have to plan their downfall, we just have to wait."

For now, Afshari said, the best compromise that dissenting politicians can hope for may be some positions in Ahmadinejad's cabinet. Mousavi is unlikely to be allowed much activity, Afshari said, adding that those seeking change will have to work outside the system, possibly with a new generation of leaders.

"They'll be definitely more radical but peaceful, like what we had in the Islamic revolution," he said. "After the shah closed all windows for reform, that's when people went to a revolutionary role."

