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## Ahmadinejad rings the changes

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's second term is likely to feature a more moderate swing of policies than witnessed during the previous four years. A factor that will impact considerably on the calculations of the United States, other Western [governments](#) and Israel as they gear up to increase pressure on Tehran over its nuclear program.

Last month's controversial [presidential elections](#) triggered undoubtedly the most serious political rupture in the 30-year history of the Islamic Republic, and was called a "crisis" by former centrist president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in his powerful Friday prayer speech. But the president's crisis-management methods, and speeches and appointments since have shown that moderation will likely define his second term.

Talk of a complete cabinet make-over, made through appointing new ministers based on "expertise and merits" is buzzing through the nation's capital. Ahmadinejad has also unveiled a new "national service plan" for recruiting technocrats that is bound to appease some of his reformist critics if implemented as planned.

Already, the appointment of a new head for Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from 2003 to 2004 - when Iran made important "confidence-building" concessions to the IAEA - has been widely interpreted in the West as indicative of a new willingness on the part of Ahmadinejad to pursue a more conciliatory path in nuclear negotiations.

"We will enter the scene with a fresh perspective," Salehi told the Iranian press. The government has denied that the resignation of Salehi's predecessor, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, had any connection to lengthy delays in the opening of the Russian-made Bushehr nuclear power plant.

Energy Minister Parviz Fatah last week contradicted the Atomic Energy Organization's pledge to deliver some 500 megawatts of electricity from Bushehr before summer's end, stating that this promise "will not be fulfilled". A spokesperson for the organization has now promised to make that delivery by autumn, although not too many people in Iran are

optimistic in light of their misgivings regarding Russia's "playing [politics](#) with the US" over the long-delayed power plant.

Another sign that Ahmadinejad is determined to instill a more moderate image for his second term is his decision to elevate the controversial Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, the vice president in charge of Tourism and Cultural Heritage during his first term, as his first vice president. Ahmadinejad made the appointment despite vehement [opposition from](#) hardliners who have not forgotten or forgiven Mashai for referring to Israeli people as friends of Iranian people.

Given the backlash against Mashai's appointment - one member of parliament, Dairush Ghanbari, interpreted it as a "declaration with war with the parliament (Majlis)" - Ahmadinejad may be forced to cancel it. This would be yet another sign that his administration is caught between opposing forces.

In the realm of [foreign policy](#), last week's meeting in Cairo between Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and Saeb Erakat, a senior Palestinian negotiator, revealed an emerging tendency on the part of Ahmadinejad's administration to tread the path of moderation in Middle East politics.

Add to this the fact that in his post-[election](#) speeches, Ahmadinejad has sought to sound less bellicose and more mainstream with respect to global issues. For instance, in a major policy speech in the holy city of Mashad last week, Ahmadinejad criticized those who wanted to create a "fortress" out of Iran and emphasized the need for "constructive engagement" (*taamol*) with the world as an important prerequisite for the nation's progress. Also, for the first time, Ahmadinejad has spoken against [police](#) restrictions in the name of "societal security" by stating adamantly that he "will not allow this".

But, the trouble with Ahmadinejad's government is that it faces formidable influence from a variety of groups that runs the gamut ideologically speaking, inviting government paralysis. The influences are not all political in nature, there is also provincial competition for cabinet posts. Several members of parliament from the province of Khorasan have lobbied the government to select some posts from their province. The argument is that some provinces have held greater weight than in previous cabinets, leading to a lack of balance in the country's development.

Such regional concerns pale in comparison to the intense jockeying for influence by various factions, including the reformists, who were the recipients of a timely boost by Rafsanjani at Friday's speech.

The speech has been vehemently criticized by the hardline clergy, [politicians](#) and newspapers such as Kayhan, whose editor, Hossain Shariatmadari, has asked why Rafsanjani did not show any appreciation of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who had praised him in his Friday prayer speech three weeks ago?

That may be so, but such criticisms overlook the importance of Rafsanjani's speech for national unity and reconciliation, given his candid statement that "we have all incurred losses" as a result of the post-election crisis, as well as his emphasis on legal channels.

It is noteworthy that the powerful Guardians Council, which was criticized by Rafsanjani, has defended its probe of complaints of voting fraud. A spokesperson for the council, Abasali

Kadkhodaii, has said that Rafsanjani did not give him an appointment at the Expediency Council (headed by Rafsanjani) to discuss the election results.

According to a Tehran University political science professor, Rafsanjani's speech is yet another sign that Iran is moving toward a "two-party system" and that it is "only a matter of time before we see this happen".

For sure, Rafsanjani's call for the release of prisoners and a free press are important issues that will have a determining influence on how Ahmadinejad's second term is viewed both at home and internationally. Yet, as more demonstrators were picked up by the authorities after Rafsanjani's landmark speech, it is equally likely that Ahmadinejad's second term will be influenced by a survival strategy of the regime that was put in overdrive as a result of the post-election furor.