

The Iranian nation stunned the world by electing Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Tehran's conservative Mayor, as the sixth President of Islamic Republic of Iran in the run-off vote in presidential elections on June 24. The run-off, unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic, between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former President Akbar Hashmi Rafsanjani was necessitated by the failure of any of the candidates to win the simple majority in the first round of presidential elections held on June 17. In the first round, among a field of 7 candidates, Rafsanjani finished first with 21% or about 6.2 million votes, while Ahmadinejad bagged 19.5% or 5.7 million votes. However, in the run-off, Ahmadinejad won a landslide victory by garnering more than 17 million votes, compared with around 10 million for Akbar Hashmi Rafsanjani. The result was all the more surprising since, in the run-off, the country's beleaguered reform camp had rallied behind Rafsanjani, urging its supporters to vote for the former president against the hardliner Ahmadinejad, who, they said, was "going to make an Iranian Taliban here."

Ahmadinejad's victory, though a landslide, was tainted by the allegations of rigging. In his first public statement following the election result, Rafsanjani alleged, "All the means of the regime were used in an organised and illegal way to intervene in the election." It was, however, Ahmadinejad's unexpectedly strong showing in the first round that evoked stronger charges of rigging by the rival candidates who insisted that the results were orchestrated by Iran's military and volunteer militia force in concert with the Guardians Council. The strongest criticism and protest came from former Majlis Speaker, Mehdi Karrubi, a moderate cleric who finished less than 1 percentage point behind Ahmadinejad. Karrubi blamed the Revolutionary Guard Corps and the basij, a volunteer militia, for interfering in the vote. "My popular votes were increasing in spite of the fact that certain sections of the Revolutionary Guards and basij forces - by paying money to religious centres and gathering places, and their unusual presence in polls, were illegally publicising another candidate," Karrubi, a member of the clerical hierarchy's inner circle, wrote in an open letter to Khamenei. Besides, Karrubi, a staff adviser to the Supreme Leader resigned from his position, promising to create a new populist political party to challenge the status quo.

Whatever the nature and level of conservative officials' interference in the electoral process, it was evident that Ahmadinejad was the favourite of the clerical leadership due to his conservative views. Therefore some sort of at least tacit support for him by the conservative-dominated institutions cannot be ruled out, although the Guardians Council dismissed complaints of fraud in the first round following a recount of just 100 ballot boxes. In fact, the hard-line elements had already shown their intention of putting a spoke in the reformists' wheel when the Guardians Council disqualified two main reformist candidates, former Education Minister, Mostafa Moin and Vice President for Sports, Mohsin Mehralizadeh. The two were reinstated later on, but only after Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei intervened.

The rigging claims notwithstanding, there is plethora of factors which could provide justification for why an overwhelming majority of Iranian voters voted for little-known Ahmadinejad. A close look at the way he conducted his campaign and the message he tried to convey to the various segments of Iranian society, particularly to the less privileged ones, reveals that Ahmadinejad attracted such a massive following not with his talk of strict Islamic values, as the western media has tried to show, but by presenting himself as a champion of the poor, promising "to strip away the power and privileges that have enriched a small segment of society and to distribute the

nation's wealth to the poor." During the campaign he promised, among other things, to deliver pensions, health insurance and unemployment insurance to women, to shift state money away from more-developed cities to less-developed communities, to provide zero-interest loans to farmers, and to stabilise prices.

It is therefore safe to infer that his populist message of economic equality struck a chord with the downtrodden who were more interested in bread and butter, and for whom Rafsanjani's rhetoric about political and cultural liberalisation and improving relations with the US had little appeal. Rather, at a time when Iran is facing intense pressure from the US over its nuclear programme, any talk of improving relations with the latter was unlikely to have gone down well with the staunchly nationalist Iranian people.

Ahmadinejad's reputation as an efficient administrator, that he earned during his tenure as Mayor of Tehran, when he had controlled prices and provided better civic amenities, might also have induced many to give him a chance, hoping he would rid them of the many problems that they have been facing in their daily life. And, interestingly, it was not only Ahmadinejad who was delivering a populist message by talking mainly about fair distribution of national wealth, almost all the candidates refrained from chanting ideological slogans - a profound departure from a quarter-century of politics grounded in appeals to religious duty.

Another factor that seems to have played in Ahmadinejad's favour is his being a non-cleric. In fact he is the first non-cleric in the history of the Islamic Republic to be elected as President. Those Iranians who were disillusioned by their country's clerical leaders' failure to achieve the goals of the Islamic Revolution might have hoped that a non-cleric, the one they could identify themselves with, would be able to materialise the revolutionary ideals.

Ahmadinejad's victory, however, is, above all, part of the rightward drift that started a few years ago. Ever since the moderate President, Mohammad Khatami, appeared to be failing to bring about the promised changes, his efforts towards reform being stymied by the powerful conservative institutions, the pro-reform elements started getting disillusioned and the movement that propelled President Mohamad Khatami to his first landslide victory in 1997 - borne upon promises of democracy, respect for human rights, and more social freedom - started losing momentum. This became evident first in the municipal elections in 2003, and then in parliamentary elections in 2004. Both these elections saw conservatives dominating the elected bodies. Also, disgruntled by the moderate-liberal tussle that characterised Khatami's eight years in power, the Iranian people seem to have decided to entrench the conservatives in all branches of Iranian life, hoping it would end the gridlock.

On the domestic front, therefore, it is certain that the gridlock that had plagued the Iranian polity since Khatami's coming to power will now cease to exist. An Ahmadinejad victory would cement the control by conservatives over Iran's dual system of democratic and theocratic institutions, following their successes in local council and parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2004 respectively. Ahmadinejad is likely to get more cooperation from the hard-line dominated legislature than President Mohammad Khatami. He is also less likely to encounter any resistance from the Guardians Council.

As far as the future of Iran's foreign and security policies under Ahmadinejad are concerned, there is less likelihood of any wild swings of the pendulum simply due to the fact that the final word on such issues rests with the Supreme Leader, and the president's priorities do not matter much. Only a day after Ahmadinejad's victory was announced, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamid Reza Assefi told reporters in Tehran that the Iranian government will continue what he called its "detente policy."

Besides, on critical foreign policy issues, Ahmadinejad seems to share the views held by the clerical establishment led by the Supreme Leader. Whatever signals have so far emanated from him corroborate this observation. He has said that he planned to move forward with his nation's nuclear energy programme, insisting that it was necessary for the development of the country. He also agreed to continue discussions with three European nations, but on an equal footing. "The EU should not talk to us from a proud distance and should come down from the ivory tower," Ahmadinejad said, when asked at his first full-scale press conference about a possible European freeze of nuclear talks over human rights issues. "The Iranian nation is a great, alert nation, and will protect its [nuclear] right seriously," he said.

However, unlike Khatami and Rafsanjani, he has maintained a belligerent rhetoric against the US, saying as long as the US continues to adopt a hostile posture towards Iran, there can be no improvement in relations. Ahmadinejad said relations with Washington were not a cure for Iran's ills. Relations with the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular have been prioritised by Ahmadinejad.

The variety of responses that Ahmadinejad's election evoked from different states not only shows how he is viewed by the foreign policy establishments in these countries, but also gives a foretaste of the course of relations that an Ahmadinejad-led Iran is likely to follow vis-à-vis these countries. Israel declared Ahmadinejad's win as proof of growing extremism in Iran, and urged the international community to stand firm against Tehran over its nuclear programme. Israeli Foreign Minister, Silvan Shalom said the poll could not be classified as free and fair and its result would lead to major problems for the wider world.

The US Administration, which has been in a standoff with Tehran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, announced its perspective that Iran remained outside of the wind of democratic change in the Middle East and thus has not changed after the presidential elections. The US government questioned the fairness of the vote and supported those who it said stood for greater freedom in Iran. "We remain skeptical that the Iranian regime is interested in addressing either the legitimate desires of its own people or the concerns of the broader international community," said a State Department spokesperson. Claiming that there were serious problems in the elections, Britain called on Ahmedinajad for reconciliation over Iran's nuclear programme. British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw said, "Regrettably, there were serious deficiencies in the election process by international standards ... For the Iranian people to have a fully free choice about their country's future, they should be able to vote for candidates who hold the full range of political views, not just candidates selected for them." The EU, on the other hand, announced it was ready to cooperate with any Iranian government, which was open to developments on human rights, nuclear programmes and other issues.

Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Ahmadijad and announced that his country was ready to develop nuclear cooperation with Iran in line with international agreements. Pakistan welcomed the election of the new President of Iran, hoping that "relations between Pakistan and Iran would continue to strengthen to the mutual advantage of the two countries." Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman, Naveed Moez expressed hope for continued warm relations with Tehran after Ahmadinejad's victory. Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammad Al-Salem Al-Sabah hoped that the new leadership would be able to build more supportive bridges with its brethren in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

However, the new President's greatest test lies in his ability to reconcile the aspirations of different segments of Iranian society, which stand bitterly divided after the recent elections. He will have to move quickly on the economic front to alleviate the sufferings of millions of poor Iranians who have pinned their hopes in his promises to affect a fair distribution of wealth. He will have to concentrate on healing the divisions and bridging Iran's religious-secular cultural chasm that has manifested itself in a more explicit way in the recent presidential elections. He seems to have realised this need when he said "moderation and tolerance will be our government's main lines, a government of friendship and tolerance that belongs to all Iranians." This could signal the beginnings of reconciliation within Iran's domestic polity.