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Iran's Sham Election: Buying Votes with Potatoes

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Tomorrow's presidential election in Iran is essentially a referendum on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's embattled leadership, which has produced economic discontent, international isolation, and greater restrictions on personal freedom. The populist Iranian president has sought to buy votes with pork barrel spending, heavy subsidies, and even free potatoes. Ahmadinejad's three challengers are all members of the Islamic revolution's old guard, men who seek to tinker with marginal reforms but remain strongly committed to the goals of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's radical brand of Shia Islamism.

The outcome of the election will affect Iran's domestic policies. The results, however, will have a lesser impact on Iran's foreign policy, which is controlled by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Even if Ahmadinejad is defeated, his successor is likely to change the tone—but not the substance—of Iran's hostile foreign policy. All of Ahmadinejad's challengers have indicated that they support Iran's nuclear ambitions, but would pursue them in a less confrontational manner.

Sham Elections for a Sham Democracy. Iran's government is not a true democracy but a theocratic dictatorship that cloaks the rule of the ayatollahs with a façade of representative government. The clerical regime hand-picked the four contending candidates from a pool of 475 who initially sought to run for the presidency. The senior clerics on the Guardian Council, which vets the candidates, severely narrowed the choices to less than 1 percent of the original field of challengers. The four who

were permitted to run for the presidency share a deep commitment to the extremist Islamist ideology that sparked Iran's 1979 revolution.

The election boils down to a referendum on Ahmadinejad's abrasive leadership. The fiery president has lost popular support primarily due to economic mismanagement, which has compounded the damage inflicted by declining oil revenues—Iran's primary source of income—after world oil prices peaked last year.

Ahmadinejad came into office in 2005 pledging to give Iranian citizens a greater share of Iran's oil wealth, but their standard living instead has fallen due to rising unemployment, high inflation, and soaring housing costs. Ahmadinejad's political opponents charge that he has squandered over \$200 billion in oil revenues since becoming president. Moreover, they contend that Ahmadinejad's confrontational style and his incendiary rhetoric regarding Israel, the United States, and denial of the holocaust has isolated Iran and hurt its interests.

The Challengers. Ahmadinejad's three challengers are:

- *Mir Hossain Mousavi*, the former prime minister from 1981 to 1989 who is regarded as a prag-

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matic and effective leader with solid revolutionary credentials;

- **Mehdi Karroubi**, the former speaker of parliament who has moderated his hard-line positions and now favors greater protections for human rights, personal privacy, and religious and ethnic minorities; and
- **Mohsen Rezai**, the hard-line former leader of the Revolutionary Guards, who is wanted in Argentina for his involvement in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center that killed 85 people.

Mousavi looms as Ahmadinejad's strongest challenger. Mousavi's reputation for effectively managing the economy during the early years of the revolution has attracted supporters during Iran's current economic malaise. A respected member of Iran's revolutionary establishment, Mousavi also has been boosted by his wife Zahra Rahnavard—the first female chancellor appointed at an Iranian university since the revolution—who has taken an unprecedented public role in his campaign. Although Mousavi lacks charisma and has been known to mumble through his speeches, he has mobilized enthusiastic crowds at mass rallies.

Mousavi has charged that President Ahmadinejad is leading Iran toward dictatorship and is damaging Iran's reputation with his shrill rants against the holocaust and truculent defiance of the United Nations Security Council on the nuclear issue. Ahmadinejad has accused Mousavi of lying about Iran's economic conditions and working with former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami in a campaign to oust him.

As the campaign grew increasingly acrimonious, Ahmadinejad has stepped up his personal attacks, charging that Mousavi's wife gained her academic position improperly and that former President Rafsanjani, whom he defeated in the 2005 elections, is backing Mousavi's campaign with money pilfered through corruption during his long government service.

Death to Potatoes. In order to escape the burden of being the incumbent candidate during a time of economic problems, Ahmadinejad seeks to paint himself as an anti-corruption reformer. He has also

tried to buy votes by allocating state funds, loans, and favors to rural areas.

In recent months his government has distributed 400,000 tons of free potatoes to the poor in a blatant effort to bribe voters. This led supporters of rival candidates to chant "death to potatoes" at their campaign rallies.

Ahmadinejad has also tried to divert attention from Iran's hobbled economy to Iran's accelerating nuclear program and growing military strength, sources of pride for many Iranians.

Although no sitting president has lost a re-election bid, Ahmadinejad could face defeat if his disastrous economic policies drain away his support from the urban poor and Rezai draws off substantial numbers of hard-line voters. Many Iranians have been infused with an "anybody but Ahmadinejad" spirit, and liberals are flocking to support Mousavi after boycotting the polls in the 2005 presidential elections. If nobody wins 50 percent of the vote, then a runoff election will be held between the top two vote-getters on June 19.

All of the challengers have expressed concern that Ahmadinejad's supporters will rig the vote. On Monday a group of Interior Ministry employees released an open letter charging that Ahmadinejad loyalists within the ministry were preparing to fix the vote. That same day Mousavi and Karroubi sent an open letter to the Guardian Council warning about the potential manipulation of election results. Ahmadinejad's opponents have no faith in the fairness of the vote-counting process and, based on their long experience with Iranian elections, they have good reason for their concern.

Implications for the United States. Like most Iranian elections, economic issues have dominated the political debate. Foreign policy issues have not surfaced as major campaign issues because all four of the candidates represent a narrow range of views based on loyal adherence to the goals of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamism. The candidates differ mostly on the tone and style that they would bring to Iranian foreign policy. Mousavi and Karroubi believe that Iran's interests are better served by reducing tensions with some of Iran's adversaries and escaping international isolation.

The election results are not likely to alter Iran's nuclear ambitions, which, in the past, have flourished under the leadership of moderates such as Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami. The challengers have promised no major changes in Iran's nuclear policy, suggesting only that they would adopt a softer and less confrontational approach to asserting Iran's nuclear "rights." None have indicated that they would halt Iran's sensitive nuclear work.

If Mousavi wins, hard-liners entrenched in government bureaucracies and the parallel revolutionary organs are likely to flex their muscles to block any substantial attempts at genuine reform, as they did during the eight-year term of Khatami. Moreover, it is the Supreme Leader, not the president, who has the final say on key defense, foreign policy, and nuclear issues. Washington therefore should not expect major changes in the substance of Ira-

nian foreign policy—regardless of who wins tomorrow's election.

The Determining Vote. The intense competition between presidential candidates has enhanced Ayatollah Khamenei's role as the ultimate arbiter of policymaking. If Ahmadinejad loses the election, it could give the Supreme Leader more room to maneuver on the nuclear issue. But if he wins, Khamenei will find it harder to alter Iran's collision course with the United States on that issue. Either way, it is the decisions of Iran's Supreme Leader, not Iranian voters, that count in determining Tehran's foreign policy.

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