

It could make a big difference

The coming election in Iran could change the region drastically, for better or worse.



Reuters

As pictured by its leaders, Iran is striding from strength to strength. The Islamic Revolution that 30 years ago toppled the shah continues to defy the country's foes, uplift its people and uphold its founding principles. Not only has it made big strides in nuclear technology. Last month it further confounded naysayers by launching a sophisticated rocket bearing its very own small satellite, Safir Omid, or Ambassador Hope, into orbit. Iran must now, declared its ebullient president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, be ranked a superpower.

A text message that flashed onto Iranian mobile phones soon after the space shot suggested a different narrative. "First finding from Omid: earth is round!" read the lighthearted gibe at what many Iranians stubbornly bemoan as the provincial backwardness of their rulers. The revolution may have brought gains in public health, education and rural electrification, among other things. Its survival against often difficult odds, plus those symbolic feats of technical wizardry, do bolster national pride even among grudging secularists. But to a large number of Iran's people, it has all come at a painful price.

This is easily measurable in terms of lost economic opportunities, fraught foreign relations and increasingly curtailed freedoms. Harder to measure is the cost in morale brought by a deep weariness with imposed pieties. Not only has this helped to push as many as 2m Iranians into dependence on the cheap drugs that pour in from neighbouring Afghanistan, and to perpetuate a crippling drain of talent through emigration. It also casts a pervasive veil of melancholy over life in general. That jocular text message, for instance, provoked killjoy security officials to give warning that senders of such subversive stuff may in future be hunted down and prosecuted.

The divergence between these world views has become more evident as Iran approaches presidential elections due in early June. The contest is likely to be bruising. Despite the abrupt withdrawal from the race of a leading reformist, the former president, Muhammad Khatami, the range of remaining contestants represents a striking diversity of interest groups and social classes. With the politicking already growing shrill, the next hundred days promise to be unusually rowdy by the normally polite, albeit quietly cut-throat, standards of Iranian politics.

It is true that the democratic elements of Iran's peculiar system, which seeks to represent both God and man, are tightly constrained. Candidates must be vetted by a Council of Guardians, made up of senior clerics, which is empowered to reject anyone who doubts the revolution's Islamic tenets. One of these is velayet el-faqih, a controversial doctrine, unique to Iran, that exalts the power of the supreme leader, or rahbar, an anointed cleric, over the people's elected representatives. This makes Iran's presidents in effect subservient, particularly in foreign policy and specifically on the nuclear issue, to the will of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has held the rahbar's office since the death of his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1989.

Such restraints are not the only ones that will curb the powers of Iran's next president. A potentially severe economic crisis also looms. This comes as a direct result of the collapse in prices for Iran's main export, crude oil, but has been worsened both by four years of Mr Ahmadinejad's recklessly spendthrift policies and by UN and other sanctions, intended to punish Iran for seeking a potentially offensive nuclear capability, which have throttled trade and stunted foreign investment.

But where's the cash?

With the budget deficit ballooning, whoever rules the country will be forced to take unpopular measures such as slashing ruinous state subsidies. Among other effects, this has kept the petrol price below a trifling ten American cents a litre, even though Iran, since it has failed to invest in refining, actually imports a lot of its fuel.

Even cynical observers concur that this election will be unusually important, and not just for Iran. "This could prove the most significant poll so far since the revolution," says a consultant to one conservative candidate. "I'd say it ranks in significance on a global scale with November's American election." A grandiose claim, perhaps. Yet it is true that, depending on the cleanness of the process and, vitally, on the scale of voter turnout, what may be at stake is nothing less than Iran's nature as a closed or relatively open society.

This carries implications that go beyond the borders of this large, ancient nation that is one of the few to proclaim its open defiance of the American-dominated world order. Iran's election will certainly affect the immediate region, replete with Iraq's continuing unrest, Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine; Iran's leadership has proved amply capable of exacerbating trouble in all those places. The trajectory taken by Iran can also influence the wider Muslim world. The country's unique experiment has the potential to set an example of peaceful transition and reform. But if hardliners insist on trying to export their revolutionary ways, tension could worsen between the Sunni majority of the world's Muslims and the Shia minority, many of whom look to predominantly Shia Iran as their champion.

A fresh mandate for Mr Ahmadinejad would, say his critics, consecrate the "revolution within a revolution" he has been trying to effect since his surprise electoral triumph in 2005. Best known to outsiders for his bellicose grandstanding, the incumbent is more familiar to Iranians as a radical and hyperactive populist who has used the tacit backing of his fellow conservative, Mr Khamenei, greatly to expand the powers of the presidency.

How the Satan-baiter plans to hold on

Determined to reignite revolutionary fervour, Mr Ahmadinejad has purged numerous suspected liberals from universities, the diplomatic service and senior government posts, replacing them with like-minded ideologues. His reinforcement of chafing restrictions on civic freedoms has sent scores of dissidents to prison, including students, labour organisers and feminists demanding equal rights, along with representatives of minority groups, such as followers of the

Bahai faith. It has brought back the ugly spectre of police cruising city streets to harass and humiliate women they deem to be immodest in their dress.

The president's open-handed economic policies, based on a windfall of \$250 billion in oil sales during his four-year term and intended to redistribute wealth, have won friends among the poor. Mr Ahmadinejad has tirelessly toured Iran's impoverished and neglected remoter provinces, snipping ribbons, laying foundation stones and fielding petitions from clamouring crowds, with flattering television cameras perpetually in tow.

But his gleeful emptying of state coffers has also made inflation surge. The current rate is 26%, though falling. Iranians, particularly the urban young who are products of a baby-boom in the 1980s, have yet to recover from the shock of house prices tripling since 2005. Meanwhile, such dubious initiatives as forcing banks to slash interest rates and lavishing giant contracts on such ideologically orthodox but questionably competent institutions as the Revolutionary Guards have brought cries of foul from most economists.

Like voters nearly everywhere, Iranians tend to put domestic issues ahead of foreign policy. Even so, the style in which Mr Ahmadinejad conducts himself sparks broad controversy. Critics charge that Iran's continuing diplomatic isolation is largely because of his unnecessary abrasiveness. But his admirers say his theatrical defiance has in fact raised Iran's prestige, forcing its foes to address the country on its own terms. As proof of Iran's ascendancy, they point to America's costly quagmire in Iraq and to Israel's failure to crush either Hizbullah or Hamas, Iran's staunch ideological allies in Lebanon and Palestine respectively, which have benefited from its paternal largesse.

An electoral victory for Mr Ahmadinejad would serve to bolster Iran's posturing as the great defender of the world's underdogs. This might not exclude a turn to pragmatism. Iranian officials have signalled repeatedly that, given friendlier moves by America, they may not be averse to co-operating on some issues with Barack Obama's administration. But a continuation of Iran's hostile stance under Mr Ahmadinejad would multiply potential diplomatic pitfalls and almost certainly slow down efforts to coax Iran into behaving as a more responsible global citizen.



*The supreme leader approves of the people's president—so far
Reuters*

A convincing electoral triumph for one of Mr Ahmadinejad's challengers from the reformist camp, which struggled to liberalise Iran during Mr Khatami's presidency from 1997 to 2005, could produce a very different result. Wary of the ever-vigilant supreme leader and chastened by past failures to overcome conservatives, who now control the elected legislature as well as such pillars of Iran's "deep state" as the security services, courts and state broadcasting

monopoly, a reformist president would probably shy away from any bold departures in foreign policy. Yet even changes in tone could have a dramatic effect.

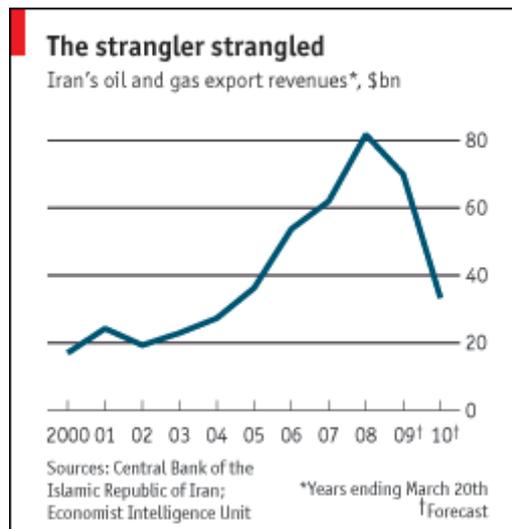
Certainly there are fixed parts of Iranian policy that bother its neighbours, such as its nuclear ambitions, its determination to oust the American forces which smaller countries in the region think they need as guarantors of their freedom, and its hostility to the idea of a negotiated Arab-Israeli peace. Yet important shared aims exist on other issues. Iran would prefer to see stable governments in Afghanistan and Iraq. It wants to help fight the drug trade. It sorely needs foreign money and know-how to produce more energy. Iran's vast reserves of natural gas make it a natural alternative to Russia for energy-thirsty Europe.

Change the mood, then

Arguably, what has prevented a meeting of minds on such matters is not the pursuit of actual national interests by Iran or its adversaries, but an attitude of mutual mistrust sometimes amounting to paranoia. Both Mr Ahmadinejad and his mentor, Mr Khamenei, share this attitude in spades. So do many Iranians, based on a reading of history that portrays Iran as a serial victim of foreign plotting. There is, indeed, no lack of evidence for such past devilry, ranging from British and American sponsorship of the coup against Muhammad Mossadegh in 1953 that ended a brief experiment in democracy, to Western backing for Iraq during its 1980-88 war against Iran (when around a million people in all were killed), to America's more recent broadening of its regional military footprint across an array of countries that ring Iran.

More sophisticated Iranians, including some conservatives, understand that adopting a hectoring tone with the West, or endlessly castigating Israel, does little to advance Iran's interests. "There is no reason for us to consider that all the world is our enemy," says Muhammad al-Abtahi, a former vice-president under Mr Khatami. Mr Abtahi chastises those Iranians who, he says, prefer to stay hostile to America just so they can pose as leaders of global opposition to the Great Satan; Iran has far more to gain than lose by dialogue. "On the nuclear issue, for instance, we believe that through dialogue we can have our rights [to nuclear technology] while also winning the world's trust. There has been nothing useful in getting three UN Security Council resolutions against us."

Mr Abtahi and his allies know that conservatives would not hesitate to frustrate the aims of the reformists if they were to regain the presidency. At best, the reformists would hope to undo some of Mr Ahmadinejad's more destructive policies by, for instance, making public accounts more open and bringing a higher calibre of people into government. More important, they believe, a convincing majority for the reformists, built on a large voter turnout, could help shift some power back from theocratic bodies to elected institutions. "For me, the most important thing is to remove the pessimistic atmosphere in society, to make people feel they can have some effect on their destiny," says Issa Saharkhiz, a prominent editor who, with scores of journalists, has been hounded out of work by the serial closure of reformist publications.



If the playing field were even, the reformists would have a good chance of returning to office. Before his withdrawal, unofficial opinion polls suggested that Mr Khatami was more popular than Mr Ahmadinejad. But the reformists face numerous and treacherous obstacles. More careful polling, for instance, revealed that, among Iranians declaring their intention to vote, the incumbent would win handily. This reflects chronic disillusion in the reformists' natural constituency, Iran's large and educated urban middle class. In the capital, Tehran, turnout in recent elections has rarely exceeded 30%, half the level in the rural regions where Mr Ahmadinejad is most popular.

Because Iran has no coherent political parties and therefore no primary elections, the reformists face another big problem. Many recall their debacle in the presidential elections of 2005, when multiple reformist candidates split the vote in the first round, letting the then widely derided figure of Mr Ahmadinejad leapfrog into a second-round run-off. Mr Khatami says he withdrew from the current race to prevent this from happening again. But his departure leaves two powerful reformist rivals in the running.

Will they split the vote again?

Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of parliament and a senior cleric with a wide following among some ethnic minorities, says he is determined to stay in the race to the bitter end. He made a respectable showing in the 2005 election, gaining notoriety with a promise to pay cash handouts from oil revenues to every citizen.

His reformist rival, Mir Hosein Mousavi, a popular prime minister during the war with Iraq, may also mount a strong challenge. His reputation for toughness and probity could appeal to conservatives as well as reformists. Yet precisely because they are seen as closer to Iran's revolutionary establishment than Mr Khatami is, neither of the two rivals is as likely to inspire the crucial constituency of fence-sitting sceptics to bother to vote.

Another challenge confronts the reformists. Iran's "deep state", increasingly bold under Mr Ahmadinejad, has made little effort to disguise its determination to block their return to power. The supreme leader, a skilled dispenser of razor-sharp innuendo despite feigning distance from the political fray, has consistently signalled support for the ruling camp. More bluntly, powerful chiefs in the army and Revolutionary Guards have stated their preference for the incumbent, while giving warning of the danger of a "velvet revolution" in the guise of reformism. State radio and television, which are under Mr Khamenei's control, give blanket coverage to Mr Ahmadinejad, while largely ignoring his opponents. Nor will reformist candidates risk being shown on the BBC's recently launched and widely praised Persian satellite-television service,

since security officials have declared that people co-operating with such enemy propaganda could be liable for prosecution.

Iranians remain uncomfortably aware that the Ansar-e-Hizbullah, a semi-official vigilante group, has in the past been accused of murdering reformists. Such shadowy groups, plus organisations more openly loyal to the supreme leader such as the Revolutionary Guards, veterans' clubs and the Basij, an auxiliary force of youthful zealots with branches in mosques, schools and universities, are also known for more peaceful political work. In many cases, such groups actually run the polling stations. Not surprisingly, their mobilisation is widely credited with securing Mr Ahmadinejad's surprise victory in 2005, which brought credible charges, from Mr Karroubi among others, of electoral fiddling in some districts.

Yet it is not entirely clear whether such cats'-paws will be put to the same uses. While many Iranians shrug that Mr Ahmadinejad's return is a foregone conclusion, others point to the often severe criticism he has endured from fellow conservatives. Mr Ahmadinejad has, in fact, yet to declare himself formally as a candidate.

One powerful potential alternative, reputed to be close to the supreme leader, is Tehran's efficient and pragmatic mayor, Muhammad Qalibaf. A distinguished war veteran and widely praised former chief of police, he has said that he would welcome dialogue with America and believes Iran can defend its principles at a lower cost than it currently pays.

Many conservatives, alarmed by the president's erratic policy and language, would prefer to see a more polished and experienced administrator in power. Some suggest it would be useful for Iran to present a new face to the world, even if it keeps the uncompromising foreign policy it has had under Mr Ahmadinejad. And even some reformists believe that, while anyone would be better than the incumbent president, it may be shrewder to back a conservative who might fulfil his promises rather than a reformist who very well might not.

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