
PSYOP and the Iranian Elections

by

Mr. Njdeh Asisian

About This Article: This article was written right after the first popular demonstrations against the Iranian 10th Presidential elections. In this paper, I try to provide an honest assessment of what is going on in the country, which the major players are and what will be the future of this unending struggle of modernism and traditionalism between the Iranian political elites. Further, this paper explains why the conservative wing of the government decided to dismantle the reformist movement within the present Iranian political system. It is important to mention that post Iranian election protests have not died out and the Iranian government still considers demonstrators as the most deadly threat to their installed government.

Editors Note: Mr. Asisian's views on the situation in Iran are specific and relevant. He is a US citizen of Iranian decent. His views are not official views of the US government or the JIOWC. Mr. Asisian would like to thank Mr. Mark Sereduck and Mr Stephen Spencer who reviewed and edited this article for publication.

Introduction

The recent Iranian election, with Ahmadinejad winning in a landslide and the reaction of the people, was an event unprecedented in the last thirty years of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, the Iranian people are in search of freedom and democratic reforms. On the other hand, the theocratic regime is trying to prolong its rule in Iran at any cost. For thirty years now, despite many different centers of power in Iranian politics, the Iranian regime has been unified and

coherent when it came to the Presidential election. Regardless of who became the President of Iran, the members of the regime were obligated more or less to accept the reality.

In the recent elections, things have changed very dramatically. As the head of the state, Ayatollah Khamenehi considered Mr. Ahmadinejad as a convenient tool to achieve some of the goals he has been pursuing for the last 30 years. He wanted to rid himself of some people that he has opposed from the beginning of the Islamic Republic. These people have challenged the Ayatollah Khamenehi and effectively contained his power. They were able to bring some balance to the domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic.

This election is noteworthy for analysis both from the framework of the legality of the Ahmadinejad's presidency and human rights issues. It is also very important to analyze how the Islamic regime was able to purge the higher echelon of the Islamic Republic from unfavorable people by reinstalling Ahmadinejad as President.

This article emphasizes the cultural Psychological Operations (PSYOP) implemented by the Iranian government. This paper does not discuss a classical or modern understanding of Psychological Operations in the Western sense. What this paper represents is a cultural Psychological Operations that may be difficult to understand for many people. In Iran the collection of actions and reactions, direct or indirect discussions, and



Woman Holds Photo of Iranian Government Oppression

Source: statesman.com

edicts of religious myths have played an important role in the implementation of a successful PSYOP.

This election has exhibited all the above-mentioned factors. This paper discusses the following issues: the roots of the current Iranian political system, the internal turmoil it has exhibited since 1979 (background), the duality of the Islamic Republic and the presidency of Ahmadinejad, the preparation for the election during which Mousawi became the main contender, the importance of the Presidential Debates (especially Mousawi-Ahmadinejad debate and its aftermath), and post election unrest and reverse PSYOP.

Background

Ayatollah Khamenehi is one of those Iranian clerics who believe in the uniformity of the government under his rule. In previous years when Rafsanjani and later Khatami were Presidents, he was not able to fully exercise his power. Therefore, he used his constitutional power through the security services, the military, and the judicial system to limit both of those Presidents' programs that might liberalize the Iranian political system, economics, and society. The appearance of Ahmadinejad as a Presidential candidate in 2005 was the best news for Khamenehi's plans.

Khamenehi's second son who is more radical than his father is, and who held a strong influence on his father's opinions and decision-making introduced Ahmadinejad to Khamenehi. Ahmadinejad's political affiliation and his ideological worldview are connected to one of the most reactionary political groups in Iranian politics. He has close ties to secretive Hojatieh organization and its leader Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, "who believes that an Islamic state does not need to have any democratic aspects because its government is directly sanctioned by God. Such a state ideally would have no elections at all, because its rulers would be appointed by clerical experts divinely inspired to make the right choice."¹

Hojatieh accepts the role of Jurisprudence in the society literally as what it was

1400 years ago. They also accept Khamenehi's role literally absolute without any discussion for time being. Further, Hojatieh and its affiliates are also millenarists who believe that they have to pave the way for second coming of the twelfth Imam (Shia Messiah).

Therefore, Ahmadinejad's political worldview and ideological background were matched with the Khamenehi's goals in regard to the absolute power of Jurisprudence in politics and religion. For example, in June, right after the election, Ayatollah Khamenehi during Friday Prayers mentioned that his opinion is very close to the Ahmadinejad's ideas. Ayatollah Khamenehi delighted to have an obedient President who is willing to follow his orders without precondition. Since 2005 Khamenehi and Ahmadinejad have become strange bedfellows. Later, I will explain how Ahmadinejad brought all the executive branches under Khamenehi's full control.

In the recent Iranian elections, Khamenehi faced his worst nightmare due to the massive participation of the people in the election. He understood that this massive popular participation would finally bring back the pre-2005 election status by renewing the conflict of opinion between him and the President he patiently hates.

Khamenehi had serious problems with main reformist candidate, Mr. Mousawi during his Premier Ship in 1980. In the mid 1980s when he was President, he tried many times to replace Mr. Mousawi with someone who was more likeminded. Khamenehi always complained that Mr. Mousawi's government was weak and performing poorly. However, according to Ayatollah Rafsanjani's memoirs, Ayatollah Khomeini was strongly against the replacement of the Prime Minister due to war and economic hardship. Further, Khomeini considered replacing the Prime Minister a destabilizing factor in the Iranian society and in the international scene.



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
Source: worldpress.com

After the death of Khomeini, the problem of the disobedient Prime Minister was resolved when Ayatollah Khamenehi obtained his office as a new leader of the Islamic Republic. One of his first changes was abolishing the office of Prime Minister, transferring all the responsibilities of Prime Minister to the Presidential office. Consequently, Mousawi lost his job, and for nearly twenty years, he did not participate in any election.

Mr. Mousawi was the least of Khamenehi's concern in this election. He faced stronger opposition. Ayatollah Khamenehi had serious problems with Ayatollah Rafsanjani. In the Friday's Prayer, he openly distinguished his differences with Ayatollah Rafsanjani. He mentioned, he has 84 points of disagreement with Rafsanjani in a wide range of issues such as foreign policy, social justice and culture. Rafsanjani was and still is a serious threat to the Khamenehi's power. Therefore, this election provided a wonderful tool to change the balance of power in the unelected part of the Iranian political system.

Further, in June 21st 2009, Associated Press reported chilling news that may finalize the Khamenehi-Rafsanjani's relations. The "State-run Press TV reported that Rafsanjani's eldest daughter, Faezeh Hashemi, and four other family members were arrested late Saturday." This incident is an unprecedented event in the last thirty years of the Islamic Republic. The government was very unforgiving toward people who were against the regime in any shape and form. However, they were always very tolerant toward the family members of the Regime. The arrest of the Rafsanjani's oldest daughter will widen the friction among the highest members of the Islamic Republic and it creates serious difficulties for future inner circle reconciliation.

The Islamic Republic's Duality and Ahmadinejad's Presidency

For a long time, the Iranian political system did not have a homogeneous decision making process. Abas Maleki, who was the previous assistant director of Iran Islamic Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and, currently the Chairman of the International Institute for Caspian Studies, described Iranian foreign policy as the conclusion of "complicated and multi-level relations among official and unofficial players, many of whom have different and sometimes opposing interests."²

The 2005 Iranian Presidential election brought hardliners into the center of the Iranian politics. Since the 2005 Presidential election, the decision-making process has changed and "for the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the legislative, judicial and executive powers, which incorporate the military, and security forces have come to hold relatively homogenous views in all political, economic, ideological, military, security, cultural, and social spheres of policy. Therefore, uniformity of views among the new policy-makers is now the hallmark of the political landscape in Iran."³

Under Ahmadinejad's leadership, the executive branch of Iranian political system has been unified and works much more in harmony with each other. After unifying the higher echelons of the government, he also purged all reformist officials from government positions in both the central and provincial administrations.

The first phase of the Khamenehi's plan to have full control of power has been fulfilled with very little resistance. The second part of the Khamenehi's plan to purge people from the unelected sections of the Iranian political system has been left for another time. If Ahmadinejad was not able to have a positive influence on the Iranian society as a whole, he was able to fulfill, Ayatollah Khamenehi's order and concentrated more power in his hands than ever. Therefore, Ahmadinejad enjoyed Ayatollah Khamenehi's full support and trust.



Iranian Woman Holding "Vote" Sign
Source: worldpress.com

Preparing an Election Scenario

Beginning of Complicated PSYOP

The current Iranian Presidential election was a real struggle between both wings of the Iranian ruling elite. The Presidential election was in the making for the last 2 years. Ahmadinejad and Khamenehi have had the upper hand for the planning and execution of the Presidential election.

On one hand, Ahmadinejad as a conservative - lost his last credibility with many urban dwellers, middle class educated Iranians, and many ordinary people who did not want to see Ahmadinejad's reelected.

On the other hand, the reform camp had difficulty finding someone to run against Ahmadinejad. Therefore, many people asked ex-Iranian President Khatami to run again for Presidential office. His supporters were mindful of fact that he does not strongly oppose Khamenehi's orders, but they had no other choice.

Khatami's entrance to the electoral process caused a great shock in the conservatives' camp. Therefore, they decided to open two fronts against the reformers, especially Khatami. First, they tried to discourage Khatami from continuing his Presidential bid. Then they attempted to draw the unskilled reformist into the Presidential election.

In the first part of their operation, conservatives began a very sophisticated psychological operation against Khatami. Through their papers, social gatherings, weblogs, and other means, they have demonized his personality, accused Khatami of being liberal, pro-Western, corrupt and many other accusations. Further, the chief editor of the Keyhan newspaper Mr. Shariatmadari in one of his articles had openly blackmailed Khatami by reminding Khatami that he can share the Benazir Bhutto's fate if he stayed in the race for long time. During this campaign against Khatami,

the pressure groups whose primary role was creating chaos were operating at full throttle. They even came very close to directly attacking Khatami.

Conservatives evaluated Khatami's psychology quite accurately. They clearly knew that Khatami was not able to take such stress, and, if he found an alternative to his candidacy, he would quit the race. The second phase of the operation was finding someone who was not capable of running an effective Presidential campaign against Ahmadinejad. They soon found their wonderful alternative Mr. Mir Hussain Mousawi, a man who had been away from active politics for the last twenty years. Most of the people did not remember him from the time when he was Prime Minister.

It seemed that conservatives have found their reformist candidate. Conservatives had won on both fronts. Mousawi entered the Presidential race and Khatami ceased his Presidential campaign simultaneously. The battleground was ready for Ahmadinejad's easy reelection. However, what conservatives did not calculate was that the people were so fed up with Ahmadinejad and the Islamic regime that they would do anything to stop his reelection.

Presidential Election and Importance of Debates

First Stage of PSYOP with Ahmadinejad & the Rest

In the beginning of the Presidential elections, no one thought that Mousawi would be able to attract many voters. Contrary to all predictions, Mr. Mousawi had become a serious contender against Ahmadinejad. Mousawi was the dark horse of the Presidential elections. The reason for Mousawi's success was neither his personality nor his programs. The Iranian people understand very well that all the Presidential candidates, including Mousawi, are trusted agents who fully support the Iranian political system. As mentioned before, many urban dwellers, middle class educated

Iranians, and ordinary people were fed up with Ahmadinejad and what he represents in Iranian politics. Therefore, they really did not care who was running against Ahmadinejad.

Mousawi's improbable success and his popularity was a real game changer in the Iranian political system. He was able to undermine the conservative political structure that was perfected after the 2005 election. The Mousawi-Ahmadinejad debate was the best example of Khamenehi's desire to clean the unwanted people from his backyard. This was the second stage of a process that was started with Ahmadinejad's first presidency.

As mentioned before, Ahmadinejad solidified his power by purging all reformist officials in the government. However, this time, his aim was higher than the first. This time Khamenehi was after the clerics who did not get along with him; people such as Rafsanjani, Khatami and others. The Presidential debate provided the perfect scene to attack Khamenehi's rivals.

It is obvious that Ahmadinejad without Khamenehi's approval was not able to attack Rafsanjani and others, accusing them of corruption and embezzlement of the national wealth. Ahmadinejad's attacks against prominent pragmatic and reformist figures were very well orchestrated. Basically, Khamenehi wanted to force Rafsanjani and others to break their relationship with the government and retire from politics. The purging of politicians such as Rafsanjani could take place only if Ahmadinejad was reelected as President. Not surprisingly, Ahmadinejad won the Presidential election.

After the Election and the Future (Second Stage of PSYOP)

Based on some rumors Ahmadinejad did not officially win the election. In contrast, he took third place among 4 candidates while Khamenehi decided to change the election's outcomes. Yet, there is another story behind the Presidential election that has more credibility.

Mr. Muhsen Rezaii, who was the IRGC's supreme commander during the Iran-Iraq War and is one of the most trusted people in the Islamic regime, participated in election under the Conservative platform. Yet he also joined reformers' protests against the election and accused the government of rigging the vote right after the election. In an interview with the Iranian National Television Channel II, he mentioned that "in 170 voting stations out of 368, the number of votes were 95-140 percent higher than the number of registered voters in those areas." In other words, at least 50 percent of voting stations were filled with invalid votes in favor of Ahmadinejad.

Before Ministry of Interior declared Ahmadinejad reelection as a President, Khamenehi, quickly sent a congratulatory note, declaring Ahmadinejad's triumphant victory as "divine will" and he asked everyone to accept the elections outcomes and stay behind the government as a religious and national duty.

This letter was a clear indication of what Khamenehi had in mind. He understood that the pragmatic and reformist wings of the government would do everything they could to express their distaste of the electoral outcomes. He wanted to show them the election was a *fait accompli*.

Khamenehi's letter was not a simple document. Khamenehi has dual power. On the one hand, he is the head of the state as a political figure; on the other hand, he has religious authority far exceeding his political authority. As a religious leader or Vali Faghih, the representative of Mehdi (Shia Twelfth Imam) on the earth, his edicts must be followed unquestionably by all Shia-Muslims, especially in Iran, regardless of their validity. For example, the Imam of Tehran's Friday prayer, Ayatollah Khatami (not related to President Khatami), in his Friday sermon stated "A person who opposes the Vali Faghih's order, he also opposes the Imam Masoum order (Twelfth Imam), and opposing Imam Masoum's order is equal to opposing God's order."

Khamenehi abused his power to force people to accept Ahmadinejad's election as a "divine will." In other words, he ordered people to accept Ahmadinejad's Presidency, so everyone must obey his order because he is the one who has most knowledge, he is infallible and, therefore, he does not make mistakes.

Ayatollah Khamenehi in the Friday prayers used Cultural PSYOP against the opposition, repeatedly asking them to end the opposition, and accept the official verdict. He also used the Iranian sensitivity toward people's lives

and their future. He openly put the responsibility for bloodshed on the activities of the opposition. Then he washed his hands from any future bloodshed. He indirectly gave *carte blanche* to the security forces, pressure groups, and the IRGC to use excessive force against the opposition without any hesitation.

Ayatollah Khamenehi learned from the Shah who was very soft against the protesters. He understands that any softness against the opposition in the streets of Tehran will end the Islamic Republic within a few months. Therefore, the regime is not hesitating to use even more powerful tools to end the protests. There are some historical precedents that when Islamic leaders felt that their system was in danger, they were ready to take extraordinary steps to stop anti-Islamic regime activities. For instance, one of the most famous examples of this brutal behavior was the massacre of 4500 of the political dissidents at the end of the Iran-Iraq war.

After the end of the war, the Iranian regime was extremely weak and people were unhappy that after eight years of war, Iran surrendered without achieving its goals, and while accepting the destruction of its economy, and the death of millions of Iranians.



Bloody Iranian Woman Holds up the Opposition Hand Sign
Source: worldpress.com

With great fear of an uprising of Iranian people and with the jailed opposition leaders leading the movement from their cells, Khomeini decided to massacre all political prisoners, regardless of their level of political engagement in the Iranian politics.

Based on the latest news, it appears that a single incident will trigger more and bloodier conflict in Iran. Perhaps, this incident will cover up the election fraud for a while and will provide permission to use all repressive tools to ruin the Iranian opposition. A suicide bomber has attacked the Ayatollah Khomeini's mausoleum and killed a few people. It is obvious that this incident could be used as an effective PSYOP against the opposition, while at the same time empowering conservatives and religious zealots to attack the opposition mercilessly, as if they are responsible for suicide bombing incident.

I would like to draw the readers' attention

to another fact that the two former Presidents, Rafsanjani and Khatami, who are extremely influential within the Iranian political system, have kept their silence neither supporting nor opposing the street demonstrations against the Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenehi. This silence is very meaningful and sent more messages than any other loud rhetoric.

Their silence is a strong indication that the regime is crumbling from within. The Islamic Republic officials who in the last thirty years were able to defend their system through their resolution and unified front are now losing their major strength, their unity.

Post Election Unrest and Reverse PSYOP

No one could have anticipated the people's anger and impatience; it was unprecedented and a surprise to all. In the past thirty years, there were many opportunities for the people to

revolt against the government, but they waited patiently, not raising their voices. According to Mr. Nouradin Pir Mavedat, a former Iranian Parliament Representative, in a Stateside interview with Radio Free Europe said Khamenehi and his allies believe that "[people] will yell for a week and for four years they'll be cooled-off." However, this dream scenario never materialized – they witnessed angry people that will not forgive as in times past!

In reality, Khamenehi and Ahmadinejad were unprepared for such an immense and uncontrollable upheaval, and only when it was too late did the realities dawn on them. Unlike times past, this time lots of bloodshed was required for the government to protect its power. Khamenehi took the first step in the Friday prayer following the election when he declared the people must either accept the election results and go home, or face repression and death in the streets.



Street Protest in Iran
Source: livejournal.com

His words had little influence on the people who have had enough of this government. Unlike the West where freedom to peaceably assemble and dissent against any government is a right of the people, here we witness another type of psychological operation. Firstly, the government's official stance was that the demonstrators were vandals and hooligans; secondly, such demonstrations justified the government's extraordinary repressive measures to crush the street demonstrations; and thirdly, they deflected responsibility for the unrest by turning the tables on foreign powers like Great Britain and the United States and blaming them for fomenting the people's unrest.

The Khamenehi-Ahmadinejad government then tried to appeal to the people's sense of Iranian history and their exclusive culture in a bid to use 'cultural PSYOP' strategies. In an appeal to national pride, they reminded the people of how many times the U.S. and Great Britain had intrusively interfered in Iranian affairs over the last hundred years. Of course, comparisons were made between the past historical record of foreign abuses and the current state of affairs, suggesting the people's accommodation of 'foreign' ideas was 'un-Iranian.' This propaganda may have influenced the people in some measure, since from all walks of life they have long been exposed to the

strong paranoia of foreign intervention.

It is important to mention here that many consider foreign radio broadcasts as having a negative influence and used as a tool against their national interests. This concept is deeply rooted in Iranian psychology to the point that people jokingly say that the BBC caused the 1979 revolution, yet some seriously believe this.

The government tried to exploit the people's psychological predisposition by turning their focus from election fraud and irregularities and toward foreign conspiracy. The government has begun to harness the media to create a massive propaganda campaign against foreign radio and television broadcasters, linking their stations to the street demonstrations. Immediately after the crackdown en masse on the demonstrators, the authorities arrested those involved in radio and television broadcasting and made them confess that foreign media encouraged them to participate in the anti-government street demonstrations.

These types of propaganda are not new in Iranian politics. In the 80s, the Islamic government tried to establish itself by the



Very Large Protest in Iran
Source: worldpress.com

heavy-handed tactics by forcing opposition members to confess and incriminate themselves on national television. Under such strong-arm measures, one wonders if the opposition party members confessed to crimes they never committed.

This time it was different. The opposition party, among many others, and even the clerics, has openly condemned the corrupt practice of parading people with opposing views in front of a television audience to confess to crimes they did not commit. Further, they reminded the government that such forced confessions are inadmissible in a court of law.

What seems obvious is that the government is in a state of shock and incapable of making an honorable compromise with the opposition; more importantly, it has no reasonable plan to reduce tensions in the streets. The ongoing propaganda of accusing the foreign media and embassies of meddling in Iranian domestic affairs will become a recurring theme and standard of PSYOP in the coming year.

Conclusion

A powerful mixture of politics and deception has been used to reelect Ahmadinejad as President of Iran. The regime believes that the people will eventually accept that fact and go home.

However, they did not calculate the people's anger against a regime that is repressive, and reactionary in nature. The

psychological operations that they launched during the election and post election periods have had deadly results for the Islamic regime. They masterfully have used both religious and Iranian cultural, sensitivities in order to silence the political dissent. Nevertheless, it had the opposite outcome.

Also at issue, here is the Khamenehi-Ahmadinejad's plan to purge moderates, reformers and pragmatists from the higher echelons of government. The disappearance of more moderate members of the Islamic Republic may facilitate the radicalization of the State with the governing clerics becoming more conservative and fundamentalist along traditional lines. The Republican system (what some pundits call the "theocratic democracy") will morph from being people-centered into a restrictive Islamic Sharia Law based system with non-negotiable edicts.

In the possible short term however, many people believe that in the new repressive political environment, Khamenehi will be a big winner. In contrast, at the macro level Khamenehi will lose significant power to forces much more powerful (Hojatieh, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and IRGC high-ranking officers). He could lose his office too. Khamenehi's misinterpretation of both the people and his leadership role during the dissent, forced him into an alliance with extremely conservative and reactionary elements that oppose a modern system of government. With the masses yearning to join the 21st Century, in Western parlance, Khamenehi may yet realize he backed the wrong horse.



Couple with "V" Sign

Source: politicaleducation.com

What we are witnessing is a process of Khamenehi cutting himself off from his main supporters, and wherein his new allies do not trust him, but are exploiting him to create an Islamic Khalifate. In such a draconian government, God and religious edicts are the main players, and democratic values are not even considered.

If the government wins the street battles with the people and purges powerful moderate clerics from government, there will be little to stop the winds that blow, we will see then and the widespread propagandizing of religious superstition and Shia eschatology. At the international level, Iran will be more politically alienated, isolated and radical in nature.

If they decided to compromise with opposition leaders, this regime may survive the current upheaval, but it has been a long and painful process of soul-searching at all levels of the Islamic Republic. If they continue to follow the hard line against their own people, it will be very difficult to believe that Islamic Republic can survive very long.

The collapse of the Islamic Republic in Iran will produce new sets of problems and challenges in world affairs. The Iranian resilience and political maturity and capabilities, however, should not be underestimated, for they have made phenomenal progress. Under the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new, modern, self-confident, well informed and democratic Iran is growing. The experiment of “theocratic democracy,” of trying to create legitimacy and standing-up political institutions with political campaigns and elections, was the best teacher of democracy for the Iranian people in order to create a vibrant Civic Society.

Besides the political maturity and reasonably fast learning curve of the Iranian people, another quality they possess is to exercise extreme patience these past thirty years. With no better political alternative to the Islamic Republic, they decided to not openly oppose their government but to rather work within its protective umbrella to protect their national interests, maintain security and provide hope for a better future.

In a word, the new Iran after Islamic Republic will have earned self-respect, become more democratic and be seen as a serious power on the world scene. Iran may also be seen as becoming a serious prototypical developmental model for the rest of the Islamic world. 📧

Footnotes:

1. Mazyar Mokti, Charles Recknagel, “Iran’s Ultra-Conservatives May See Chance To Revive ‘Wilting’ Revolution” available from http://www.rferl.org/content/Irans_Ultraconservatives_May_See_Chance_To_Revive_Wilting_Revolution/1768776.html; internet; accessed 4 Jul. 2009.
2. Abas Maleki, Sanad Cheshmandaz va Ravabet Khareji Iran, trans. By Njdeh Asisian, “The Outlook Document and Iranian Foreign Policy,” Institute of Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies (IRAS), available from <http://www.iras.ir>; internet; accessed 3 May 2008.

3. Center for Strategic Research “Iran’s New Foreign Policy”; available from <http://www.csr.ir/departments.aspx?lng=en&abtid=07&&depid=106&&semid=661>; Internet; accessed Oct. 10 2007.

