

## Iran at a Crossroads

Iran's post-election upheaval complicates matters for its neighbors and the West

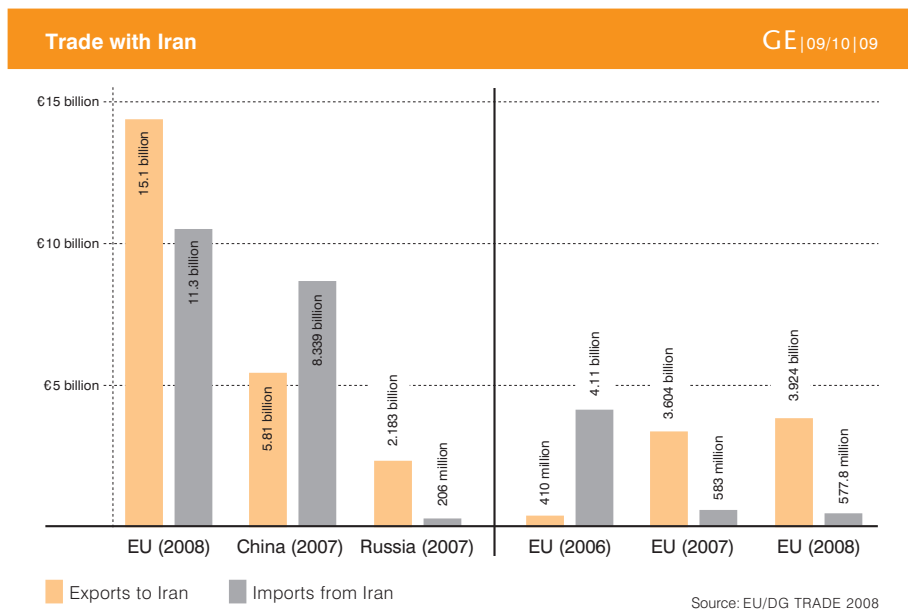
Mehrdad Khonsari | **The controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran marks a major turning point in the country's post-revolution history. For the first time in more than a century, a mass movement is being led not by clerics, but by Iranians with a secular, democratic agenda.**

The public outburst over the declared outcome of the June 12 vote constitutes the most serious challenge ever to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. While the revolution of 1979 was a national response by conservative elements and religious leaders to modernization, the recent unrest is a popular rejection of the revolution's religious conservatism, which has stifled modernist aspirations and isolated Iranian society. Moreover, events since the election have highlighted the hitherto largely dormant sentiments regarding the concept of *Velayate Faghih*, the Guardianship of the Clergy, which is the center piece of the country's constitution.

In Iran, after three uneasy decades of steady economic decline and misgovernance which have marred every aspect of life for most Iranians, there is consensus within the ranks of the country's educated elite that Ahmadinejad has exacerbated matters. In particular, they blame his administra-

tion with corruption, nepotism, and reckless management of the economy that has seen both inflation and unemployment figures rise to well above 25 percent despite the country's more than 240 billion dollars of oil revenues in the past four years. Moreover, they are unhappy that Ahmadinejad's provocative rhetoric such as his call for "wiping Israel off the face of the earth" or his denial of the Holocaust has blocked the infusion of much needed foreign investment and technology.

Many opinion makers in and out of Iran had boycotted the previous presidential election in response to a political system that requires all candidates to have their credentials as true believers checked by the Guardians Council (whose members are either appointed or approved by the Supreme Leader). Most of the boycotters urged people to participate in the June 12 election to prevent the country from sliding into more economic



trouble, social disorder, and international isolation as a result of another calamitous four years of Ahmadinejad’s administration.

### No Great Expectations

No one expected a change of president to result in a drastic change of direc-

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tion in Iran’s foreign or domestic policies, given the fact that all ultimate policy decisions are made by the country’s Supreme Leader. People were, nonetheless, hopeful that a Moussavi administration might at least manage the economy better and permit a greater measure of individual freedom. With the support of some of the country’s more popular figures such as former President Mohammad Khatami and many other respected politicians, academics, writers, and artists, a bandwagon for what has

come to be called a “Green Movement” was created that seemed invincible and destined to win by a wide margin.

For its part, despite some serious clashes that resulted in a number of deaths and serious casualties, the government’s post-election strategy has been designed to avoid any “shooting” confrontation with the protestors, resorting instead to such tactics as scaremongering, intimidation, and public harassment to discourage mass gatherings. In implementing this strategy, which did not prevent the killing of number of protestors, more than one thousand key dissidents consisting of all potential organizers and prominent reformist politicians have been arrested, imprisoned, and forced to make confessions before being put on a show trial before a Revolutionary Court.

Most foreign governments, angered at Ahmadinejad’s uncompromising

attitude in resolving Iran's nuclear dispute with the IAEA and the UN Security Council, had hoped to make a new start toward resolving these outstanding issues with a less dogmatic Iranian president. The prospects for President Obama's initiative to engage the Islamic Republic in a new atmosphere of mutual respect and equality instead of threats and recriminations (an initiative supported by America's European allies), would clearly have benefited from a less provocative interlocutor on the Iranian side.

In the Arab world, there are a number of threats vis-à-vis Iran. There is the constant threat posed by a Shiite resurgence in the region under Iranian auspices and the strategic concerns exacerbated further by the potential emergence of a nuclear Iranian state. What is more, most Arab leaders have also been angered by the effect that Ahmadinejad's harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric has had within their own societies. His departure would therefore have removed a major source of tension, given their stands in wishing to reach a final settlement with Israel. They were simply not in a position to appease their own publics in a similar way. And finally, even the most sceptical of Israelis could have taken some comfort in the fact that a new Iranian president with different body language and a less provocative discourse albeit in pursuit of the same general policies, would undoubtedly have reduced existing tension to some extent.

Sadly the scenario that unfolded confounded expectations and compounded all previous dilemmas, especially for the United States and its European partners. While China, Russia, and the Arab League were quick

to congratulate Ahmadinejad's re-election, the U.S. and Europe criticized the regime's brutal suppressing of peaceful demonstrators challenging the election result. This exacerbated matters and led Islamic authorities to openly accuse the United States and the United Kingdom of inciting what in their minds is nothing less than a color revolution.

For their part, the United States and its Western allies have tried to steer a measured course in their reactions to Iran's current internal problems. Nonetheless, most leaders, including President Obama, have had no alternative but to increase the level of criticism against the Islamic regime in the face of state brutality that has evoked so much international outrage and anger.

The fact remains that for the international community dealing with Iran's nuclear

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aspirations and putting an end to its various nefarious activities in places like Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, remain key priorities. While a new Iranian president would have provided an opportunity to engage in a new process with Iran, there is now a new urgency for resuming discussions no later than mid September. However, prospects for any kind of a satisfactory resolution of Iran's nuclear activities appear bleak in the wake of Ahmadinejad's reelection. Having shown the stern face of his government domestically and having accused the West of orchestrating the current unrest in Iran, it is unrealistic to expect a more conciliatory attitude from his government.

On the contrary, isolated and deprived of legitimacy both at home and abroad, there is now a greater incentive for the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad tandem to insist on holding the kind of trump cards that can ensure the survival of their unpopular regime. While Islamic leaders appear amenable to the notion of direct engagement with the United States and its Euro-

pean allies over the nuclear issue, they will likely remain firm and uncompromising over such issues as uranium enrichment and the kind of additional safeguards being demanded by the IAEA and the Security Council.

#### Little Chance for Cooperation

In the current atmosphere—which has essentially negated Obama’s initial hopeful gestures towards Iran—it would be imprudent to expect a dogmatic anti-American revisionist state to facilitate the promotion of peace and stability in the region. Instead, Iran is more likely to make every effort to bolster surrogates like Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nassrollah, Hamas leader Khalid Mashal, Moqtada Sadr in Iraq as well as the likes of Baitolah Mehsud and his cohorts in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, if only to fend off any kind of overt or

covert Western support for the Iranian people who constitute the main threat to the regime’s survival.

Therefore, in circumstances that hold little prospect for an acceptable diplomatic compromise, other options appear to be confined to the imposition of more severe sanctions, or the threat of yet another unwanted and potentially catastrophic conflict in the Middle East.

In the end, there is no question that a seriously divided Iranian regime has suffered a major blow from which it may never fully recover. In the past Iran has so often surprised even the most experienced observers that it would be foolish to project how this crisis will ultimately play itself out. After 30 years of economic decline, social upheaval, human rights violations, and international demonization, one can safely assert that the luster of the Islamic Revolution has vanished. In its place is an opening for a new, more current aspiration that is more responsive to the wishes of Iran’s mostly secular and democratic subjects.



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