

## **The Six Presidents**

### **Shaul Bakhash**

- Iran's constitution vests ultimate authority in the supreme leader, but the presidency has developed into a powerful office.
- The last three presidents have each stamped his own personality and politics on social and economic life, domestic politics and foreign policy.
- Powerful presidents have also aroused powerful opposition. Presidential administrations have been characterized by factionalism between the president's party and his opponents. They have also been driven by tension over authority between the president and the supreme leader.
- The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seems a departure from the past. He is building up a power base among the same constituencies in the military, judiciary and security agencies that are the supreme leader's base of support. This trend, if sustained, has important future implications.

### **Overview**

The Islamic Republic's initial constitution provided for a president with limited powers and a prime minister as head of the cabinet and government. The first president, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, sought control of the government apparatus. But he faced fierce opposition from the clerical party, even as he dealt with revolutionary turmoil, the American hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq War. He was impeached during his second year in office. Under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the president took a back seat to the prime minister.

Constitutional amendments in 1989 abolished the prime minister's post, creating a presidential system. The three presidents that followed each put his own distinct mark on the country. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani moved foreign, economic and social policy in a more pragmatic direction. But in his second term, he lost the initiative to the supreme leader and conservatives. Mohammad Khatami launched a period of unprecedented political liberalization. But he was similarly thwarted by opposition from the hardliners and the leader's office.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to office as a populist and built up a base of support in the security and military services, independent of the supreme leader. A key issue is whether the emergence of the Revolutionary Guards during the Ahmadinejad presidency as powerful political actors will be a passing phenomenon or a permanent feature of the Islamic Republic.

### **Abolhassan Bani-Sadr 1980-1981**

Abolhassan Bani-Sadr was one of the anti-shah exiles who returned to Iran on the eve of the monarchy's ouster. He was elected the first president of the Islamic Republic and took office in January 1980. He owed his electoral success to close ties to revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, visibility gained from books and essays on Islamic government and economics, and a prominent role as the architect of the sweeping nationalizations of private industries, banks and insurance companies that immediately followed the revolution.

His presidency was marked by an intense rivalry over policy and power between his camp and the clerical group around Khomeini, led by Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti and the Islamic Republic Party (IRP). The IRP-dominated Majles, or parliament, frustrated Bani-Sadr's agenda and pushed its own program. The government was paralyzed for months in a stand-off over cabinet appointments between the president and new prime minister, Mohammad Raja'i, a Beheshti protégé. Bani-Sadr wanted to dismantle or at least curb the unruly revolutionary committees and revolutionary courts. The clerical party supported these institutions.

The rivalry was further fueled by the 444-day American hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq War. Bani-Sadr sought the release of the American diplomats seized when the U.S. Embassy was over-run by militant students in November 1979. His clerical rivals used the embassy seizure to deepen the radical temper of the revolution. In the war with Iraq, Bani-Sadr championed the regular army and conventional military strategy. The clerics championed the Revolutionary Guards and "revolutionary" defense.

Bani-Sadr initially enjoyed strong support from Khomeini, who endorsed the president's call for a return to normalcy and an end to revolutionary turmoil. He allowed Bani-Sadr to name the national broadcasting chief and assume his authority as commander-in-chief. But when Khomeini's attempts to mediate between the president and his IRP rivals failed, he sided with the clerical camp and allowed Bani-Sadr's impeachment. In mid-1981, the Majles voted 177-1 (with 33 absent or abstaining) to oust him. Bani-Sadr, in hiding, escaped into exile.

### **Raja'i and Khamenei 1981-1989**

Mohammad Ali Raja'i succeeded Bani-Sadr in a hastily-organized and barely-contested election in July 1981. He took the oath of office on August 2, but he was assassinated on August 30. He was succeeded by Ali Khamenei in another largely uncontested ballot held in October. Khamenei's selection reversed an informal Khomeini dictum that clerics should not assume the presidency. One of the founders of the IRP, Khamenei had served briefly as supervisor of the Revolutionary Guards and also as minister of defense.

Khamenei served two four-year terms as president, but was over-shadowed by Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi who steered the country through the difficult years of the Iran-Iraq War. Khomeini even publicly and sharply reprimanded Khamenei in January 1988, when the president dared to suggest that the constitution placed limits on the authority of the state and parliament in the economic sphere.

Khamenei's presidency was marked by the brutal suppression of the radical opposition parties between 1981 and 1983, when thousands of young men and women were jailed and killed, often in the streets; by the marginalization of the centrist opposition parties; and by the murder in prison of over 2,000 members of the radical left-wing groups at the end of the Iran-Iraq War.

In other spheres, Khamenei was identified with the 'moderate' rather than the radical wing of clerics in Khomeini's inner circle. He supported Rafsanjani's controversial proposals to allow more scope for the private sector in the economy. After Khomeini's death in 1989, Khamenei was selected as his successor, with the expectation that he would be a relatively pliant supreme leader.

#### **Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani      1989-1997**

Rafsanjani was inaugurated in July 1989, at a watershed moment. Khomeini had died in June and his lieutenants were now in charge. The Iran-Iraq War was over, permitting Tehran to begin the post-war reconstruction. After Khomeini's death, the constitution was amended to eliminate the post of prime minister and vest his powers in the president. In the post-Khomeini period, Rafsanjani was the dominant figure in the two-man team of president and supreme leader that ran the Islamic Republic.

Rafsanjani attempted to move the country in a more pragmatic direction by ending Iran's isolation. He launched economic liberalization, opening the state-dominated economy to domestic and foreign private sector investment. He placed technocrats in key posts. And he mollified women, the young and the middle class by easing social and cultural (but not political) controls.

He quietly resumed diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Egypt. He in effect sided with the U.S.-led coalition to oust Iraq from Kuwait. And he helped win freedom for American hostages held by Lebanese allies.

He ushered in a controversial five-year development plan that envisaged foreign borrowing and greater private sector involvement. The government reduced exchange rates from seven to three, eased import and foreign currency restrictions, lifted price controls, and reduced state-subsidized goods from 17 to five. Hundreds of state-owned enterprises were slated for privatization.

The easing of social and cultural controls was evident in many spheres. Women could appear in public in brightly-colored scarves and show a bit of hair, nail-polish and lipstick. Young men and women could openly socialize on walks along the foothills of Tehran. The government tolerated a brisk underground trade in video-cassettes of Hollywood films. Previously banned satellite dishes allowed Iranians to tune in to CNN and "Baywatch." Art galleries reopened.

Minister of Culture Mohammad Khatami adopted more liberal policies on film, theater, art, books and journals, such as *Zanan*, which addressed women's issues. In literary and intellectual journals, such as *Kiyan* and *Goftegu*, a guarded but lively debate took place on civil society, the relationship between religion and democracy, and the balance between state authority and individual freedoms. The film industry flourished; Iranians won several international prizes.

Political restrictions remained, however. Several opposition leaders in exile were assassinated by Iranian agents. In 1994-1995, a number of intellectuals in Iran were found mysteriously dead on the streets or died in police custody. Rafsanjani never publicly condemned these killings. The political press remained closely controlled. Even centrist opposition parties, such as the Iran Liberation Front, were barely tolerated. The radical wing of clerics was excluded from 1990 elections for the Assembly of Experts, a body that chooses the supreme leader, and from 1992 parliamentary elections. But with the right-wing dominant, cultural liberalization ran into trouble. A conservative parliament purged Culture Minister Khatami in 1992, and Rafsanjani's brother as the head of state radio and television two years later.

Supreme leader Khamenei, gradually amassing power, campaigned against a Western "cultural onslaught." Officially-sanctioned zealots attacked bookstores, cinemas and lectures by philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, who argued for a tolerant, pluralistic Islam open to change and free of clerical domination. In 1993-1995, several journalists were sentenced to lashings or jail.

Other parts of Rafsanjani's program also began to unravel. Excessive government spending and the easing of import and currency controls depleted foreign exchange reserves and led to inflation. Iran's foreign debt rose. Severe retrenchment followed. In 1994-1995, imports were cut and private sector credit restricted. Foreign exchange controls, multiple exchange rates and price controls reappeared. Hardship led to riots in several towns in 1992 and again in 1994-1995.

Rafsanjani's attempt to normalize foreign relations was hampered by Iran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process launched in Madrid in 1991 and support for Hezbollah, Lebanon's radical Shiite movement. Iran objected to America's large military presence in the Persian Gulf. Unable to purchase armaments from the West, Iran turned to China and Korea for short- and medium-range missiles and other

weaponry. Washington was also disturbed by evidence Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapon. Iranian protégés were implicated in Buenos Aires bombings in 1992 and 1994 at the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center.

Rafsanjani tried but failed to limit the damage done to Iran's international relations by a death sentence issued by Ayatollah Khomeini against British writer Salman Rushdie, whose novel *The Satanic Verses* he considered offensive to Islam. In an attempt at an opening to the United States in March 1995, Rafsanjani signed a \$1 billion agreement with the American oil company Conoco to develop Iranian offshore fields. But President Clinton killed the deal with an executive order that barred U.S. investment in Iran's oil sector.

By the beginning of his second term, Rafsanjani had lost the initiative to the conservatives, now led by Khamenei. Rafsanjani left behind a legacy of pragmatism in domestic and foreign policy and also a political organization, the Executives of Construction, which would play a significant role in launching the reforms of the Khatami presidency. Launched by 16 of Rafsanjani's cabinet ministers and high officials on the eve of the 1996 parliamentary elections, the group emphasized economic development and private sector entrepreneurship rather than ideology and revolutionary zeal. Along with allies, it won a bloc of 80 seats in the 270-member Majles and subsequently threw its electoral weight and skills behind the election campaign of Mohammad Khatami.

### **Mohammad Khatami      1997-2005**

Khatami was the dark-horse winner of the 1997 presidential election. He galvanized voters by emphasizing the rule of law, respect for rights, tolerance for diverse views, special attention to the needs of women and youth, and an opening to the outside world. Khatami won 70 percent of the vote – in an 80 percent turnout. He won a second term in 2001 by a similar margin.

The Khatami era ushered in political openings not experienced since the revolution's early months. The culture and interior ministries granted licenses allowing the emergence of a vigorous press and professional, civic and political associations. Khatami forced two intelligence ministers to resign and curbed some of the ministry's excesses. Elections for local councils – promised in the constitution but never held – were conducted for the first time.

Economically, the sharp drop in oil prices that coincided with Khatami's election restricted government spending and investment opportunities. His aides were also initially divided between economic liberalization and state control. But by Khatami's second term, differences had been ironed out in favor of economic liberalization. The government simplified the tax code and import regulations, unified exchange rates, and allowed private banks and insurance companies for the first time since the revolution. A

considerable portion of oil revenues was set aside in a reserve fund for investment and as a cushion for difficult times. Privatization of state-owned industries was resumed.

In foreign policy, Khatami adopted language to end Iran's opposition to Israel's existence and the Arab-Israeli peace process. In a CNN interview, he called for a dialogue between the Iranian and American people, a possible prelude to government talks. He boldly nullified Khomeini's death decree against writer Salman Rushdie, removing a major obstacle to economic and diplomatic relations with Europe. He agreed to suspend Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment program to allow negotiations with the Europeans to go forward.

From the beginning, hardliners in the security services, the Revolutionary Guards, the leader's office and parliament sought to undercut Khatami's political liberalization. Several reformist newspapers were closed down. Tehran Mayor Gholam Hossein Karbaschi, who helped engineer Khatami's victory, was tried on trumped-up charges of corruption. He was sentenced to two years in prison and barred from public office for 10 years. Parliament forced Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri out of office and the judiciary imprisoned him after he started a popular newspaper. Khatami's chief political strategist and adviser, Sa'id Hajjarian, barely survived an assassination attempt that left him disabled. Khamenei undercut Khatami's overture to America and softer tone on Israel.

During Khatami's first term, the reform movement survived attempts to derail it. In 2000, voters gave a loose coalition of parties closely associated with Khatami a working majority in parliamentary elections. But the vote proved to be the turning point. Reformists called for changes hardliners found threatening: a liberal press law, an independent judiciary, a ban on Revolutionary Guards' involvement in the economy, parliamentary oversight of the intelligence ministry and national broadcasting and limits on the supreme leader's wide powers. In a 10-week period, the judiciary closed over 20 publications, virtually shutting down the reformist press. The Guardian Council, a constitutional watch-dog body, barred parliamentary oversight of organizations that came under the supreme leader – the judiciary, military and national radio and television. The supreme leader prevented parliament from passing a more liberal press law.

Journalists and intellectuals were again arrested and jailed. Khatami seemed helpless to protect them. His silence then – and when security forces and thugs beat up protesting students at Tehran University in 1999 – were indicators that he had lost the initiative. Control had passed to the hardliners.

### **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad 2005 -**

Ahmadinejad, the mayor of Tehran and a former provincial governor, was elected president in 2005 after a run-off vote against Rafsanjani. He campaigned as

champion of the “little man” against the old establishment. His humble life-style contrasted sharply with Rafsanjani’s wealth. Revolutionary Guards and paramilitary forces mobilized voters for Ahmadinejad, while many young and middle class voters, disappointed at the failure of reform, stayed home.

A populist in style and substance, Ahmadinejad distributed largesse to the poor and lower middle class. His presidency coincided with high oil prices. Oil revenue during his first five years equaled the total oil income for the previous 25 years, but was largely wasted on short-term, non-productive programs.

He removed many in the ruling establishment from office and named others from the armed services and bureaucratic middle ranks to the cabinet, ministries, government organizations and even hospitals and universities.

He ignored established procedures, laws and regulations. He drew on the oil reserve fund for pet projects without consulting parliament. The Plan Organization, responsible for Iran’s five-year development plans, was abolished, as he considered long-term planning pointless. He stopped attending meetings of the Supreme Defense Council. Later in his two-term presidency, he named personal envoys on the Middle East, Afghanistan and elsewhere, by-passing the foreign ministry.

Ahmadinejad’s presidency was marked by a sharp increase in the powers of the Revolutionary Guards and security agencies. He named many former Revolutionary Guard commanders to top posts and favored the Guards with huge, no-bid government contracts. By his second term, the Revolutionary Guards had become an economic powerhouse in the energy sector, armament manufacturing, contracting, electronics, automobile assembly and transportation. They also began to interfere in political matters. He named hardliners to head the ministries of culture, interior and intelligence. Press censorship and harassment of intellectuals sharply rose. In political coverage, state television became an instrument of the intelligence ministry.

In foreign policy, Ahmadinejad adopted a truculent posture towards the international community. He called for the eradication of Israel and denied the Holocaust. He challenged America’s international dominance and called for a new world order. His government pushed ahead with its nuclear fuel enrichment program, despite new U.N. and U.S. sanctions between 2006 and 2010.

In June 2009, Ahmadinejad won a second term in a widely disputed election. Peaceful protests by hundreds of thousands in Tehran were put down brutally. Thousands were detained and more than 100 accused in a televised mass show trial. Iran appeared to be edging towards a police state, reflected most by the increasing powers of the Revolutionary Guards in internal security and the propensity of its commanders to comment on political affairs.

## **The future**

- Khamenei outmaneuvered and neutralized both Rafsanjani and Khatami, whose basic policies he did not always embrace. Khamenei initially supported Ahmadinejad, but the distance between the two men has been growing.
- Ahmadinejad has been able to build a base of support among the very constituencies on which Khamenei depends: The Revolutionary Guards, the paramilitary forces, the security agencies and the judiciary.
- The Revolutionary Guards, the security agencies and their branches crushed the Green Movement that emerged to protest the contested 2009 election. They are claiming an increasingly larger role in political affairs.
- Allegations of vote tampering in the 2009 election could impact what happens in the next elections for parliament in 2012 and president in 2013. The key issues are: First, whether those in power – fearing re-emergence of the Green Movement and determined to hold onto power – will try to influence the outcome. Second, whether the Green Movement will put up – or be allowed to – run candidates. Third, how much of the electorate will turn out to vote.

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